A.G. Marshall
The Prince and the Sea Witch
A Villain's Ever After

THE PRINCE AND THE SEA WITCH

A RETELLING OF THE LITTLE MERMAID

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For the Chirico Family
Audrey, Joseph, Vera, and Ruby

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CHAPTER 1

Briony fidgeted as a passing piece of seaweed tickled her fin. The rocky ledge she sat on pressed into her scales, and she longed to leave it and stretch out her tail with a swim through the open ocean. She shared nervous glances with her classmates and watched their dark hair ripple through the water as they looked from side to side, searching for whatever had caused the delay.

Class was over. Why had they not been dismissed?

Their elderly teacher, Sage Chiton, floated serenely above them. Her silver hair lit the dark cavern with an ethereal glow. Sage Chiton's hair was the only indication that she was any older than her students. Her skin was smooth as a pearl and tinged with the same deep blue as the water around them. Her eyes were bright and alert.

"Good news," Sage Chiton said, smiling as she finally broke the tension. "A ship left port a few hours ago. Tonight you will have your first feast."

Briony cheered along with the rest of her classmates. The first feast marked the end of a mermaid's formal education. There would be no more boring lectures. No more sitting on uncomfortable rock ledges. She would be free to explore the ocean and do as she pleased.

"Are there any questions about the feast?"

Sage Chiton said this as an afterthought, clearly not expecting any questions on a topic that had been so thoroughly covered in her lectures.

A hand shot up.

"Yes, Lyra?"

The youngest member of the school smiled brightly at her teacher.

“What happens to men who aren’t part of a feast? Do they eventually die if they stay on land?”

The other mermaids groaned. They were almost free from this classroom! Why was Lyra keeping them here by asking pointless questions?

Sage Chiton motioned for them to be quiet.

“An interesting question, Lyra. Yes, humans still die if they are not feasted, and their lives are much shorter than ours.”

Briony leaned forward, interested in spite of herself. She had never considered what humans did on land. Had never thought of them outside the context of the feast. But of course men had their own world, living and dying when they weren’t sailing on the sea. Why had she never thought of that before?

“Do they become foam on the ocean as we do when we die?” Lyra asked.

Three mermaids sitting in a corner across the cavern giggled, and their laughter rippled through the water.

“Of course they don’t,” Coral said. “Haven’t you seen their bones littering the seabed?”

“Maybe she’s too little to see the bone yards,” Conch said. “Maybe she can’t swim that far.”

She said this in a whisper, as if speaking privately to her sisters Coral and Cuttle, but her voice was loud enough for everyone to hear. More laughter rippled around the room. It wasn’t far to the bone yards. Only a very young or very weak mermaid wouldn’t be able to swim the distance.

Lyra was the youngest in the class, but Briony suspected her size had less to do with age than with natural build. Even when she aged, the little mermaid would always be little.

“I hope she can swim far enough to make it to the feast,” Cuttle said in another half-whisper.

The three sisters laughed again. They were the oldest in the class and also the biggest. Still, Lyra pushed off her seat, prepared to fight them in spite of the size difference and being outnumbered three to one.

Sage Chiton pushed Lyra back onto her rock and spoke quickly to interrupt the conflict.

“Lyra’s question brings up an interesting point about the differences between humans and mermaids.”

The class groaned, sensing the beginning of another lecture. Briony sank back onto her rock and rubbed a sore spot on her tail. If Sage Chiton noticed her students’ discomfort, she ignored it.

“Lyra is correct that we become sea foam and cease to exist when we die. The humans, however, do not follow this path. They have an immortal soul that lasts forever. When they die, their soul rises above the water and into the air, flying into the stars to a place the humans call heaven.”

“Heaven?” Briony said.

Everyone glared at her for asking the question, and she gave them an apologetic look. She hadn’t meant to speak out loud, but she found herself fascinated by this subject. She often sneaked away from the school at night to swim to the surface and stare at the stars. The sky was like another ocean floating above them, even more vast and mysterious than the world beneath the waves. Briony liked the idea that it was possible to reach those shining stars and explore them.

“Briony wishes she were human,” Conch said, nudging Coral and Cuttle as she gave Briony a nasty look. “She wants to die and go to heaven.”

The three sisters laughed, and Briony slumped against her rock as if she could hide by making herself smaller. There was no point fighting back against the sisters. It was far better to avoid them.

“How foolish. Who wants to be a human?” Cuttle said. “They have nasty stumps called legs instead of elegant tails. They can’t even swim properly.”

“I do,” Lyra said suddenly. “I want to be human and have an immortal soul so I can live forever.”

The entire class stared at her in silent shock. Sage Chiton recovered first.

“What a thing to say, Lyra! We are much better off than the humans!”

“But we cease to exist while they live forever! That’s not fair!”

“We mermaids live three hundred years happily in the sea. We feast on magic and music and swim wherever we please. The humans live a hundred years at most and must toil in the hot sun to earn their keep. We are infinitely better off than they are.”

Briony nodded in agreement with the rest of the class, but she found that she didn't entirely agree. Yes, she loved life as a mermaid. She loved swimming in the deep waters and playing in the waves, but would it not be better to have an immortal soul and fly amongst the stars forever?

"So you're saying that we have no choice but to become sea foam?" Lyra said. "That we should accept our fate? That there is no way for a mermaid to gain an immortal soul and live forever?"

"We'll get souls in the feast, stupid," Cuttle said.

"But those don't make us live forever. Why?"

The class turned toward Sage Chiton. The elderly mermaid sighed.

"I have been teaching for over a century, and you are the most troublesome class I have ever had. You should be preparing for your first feast, not squabbling about humans and souls."

"But is it possible for a mermaid to live forever?" Lyra asked. "Or maybe you don't know. Maybe I should ask Sage Whelk."

Sage Chiton bristled.

"Don't be ridiculous. Sage Whelk doesn't know anything that I don't. Yes, it is possible for a mermaid to gain an immortal soul and live forever."

"How?"

Lyra's voice was sharp, as if she were issuing a command rather than asking a question. Briony leaned forward, eager to hear the answer. She didn't like the idea of turning to sea foam any more than Lyra. Across the cavern, Conch, Coral, and Cuttle tried and failed to hide their interest.

"It isn't easy," Sage Chiton said. "You must find a man willing to share his soul with you."

"Men are willing to give us anything we want," Conch scoffed.

"This is different. If a man loves a mermaid so much that she is worth more to him than his father and mother and kisses her as a sign of his love, then part of his soul passes into the mermaid. Her tail splits into legs, and she can no longer return to the sea. She will live a short life on the land, toiling with the other humans. And when that short life is over, her immortal soul will float to the stars."

"But that sounds easy!" Lyra said. "Don't all men fall in love with our songs the moment they hear them? All we have to do is sing and ask them to kiss us and share their soul."

“Foolish girl! That love is for your song, not for you. It is not an easy thing to earn true love, and you must give up much in return. It is far easier to use your song and take what you want.”

Sage Chiton grinned and tossed her silver hair. The school of mermaids grinned with her, matching their teacher’s predatory expression. Briony swallowed. This discussion was raising uncomfortable questions she had never considered before.

She looked around at her classmates, hoping to see that at least one other mermaid shared her doubts. But her classmates simply stared at their teacher’s hair, silver light glittering in their eager eyes.

Above them, singing filled the water. The ship had been spotted, and the other mermaids were luring it toward the school in preparation for the students’ first feast.

The young mermaids sat up straight, turning toward Sage Chiton, their eager eyes silently asking for permission to go. She nodded, and her silver hair rippled through the water and cast glimmers of light on the cavern around them.

“Go. Have fun.”

The students cheered in excitement as they pushed off their rocks and swam toward the surface. Coral, Conch, and Cuttle swam together, pushing other mermaids out of their way until they were in the lead. Lyra darted through the crowd, passing those the sisters pushed aside and almost keeping up with the trio despite her smaller size.

Briony swam slowly in the back of the group, her throat tight as she stared at the ship’s dark shadow on the surface of the water.

CHAPTER 2

The sick feeling in Briony's stomach grew stronger as she approached the ship. Sage Whelk was already there. She directed the young mermaids to stay quiet and wait while the adults guided the ship toward them. Briony had more questions, but there was no time to ask them. The sage mermaids were busy preparing for the feast.

Briony found Lyra in the group and swam over to her.

"Are you nervous?"

The little mermaid scoffed.

"Of course not. I may be small, but I have the strongest voice in our school. I will catch more men than any other mermaid today."

She cast a significant glance toward Conch, Cuttle, and Coral. Briony's eyes widened in surprise.

"We only need to catch one."

"And how am I going to earn an immortal soul if I only catch one?"

"Sage Chiton said it's impossible to earn a soul by feasting."

"Sage Chiton doesn't know everything."

Above them, Sage Whelk gave the signal. Lyra flipped her tail and sped away from Briony, singing as she swam toward the surface. The rest of the school swam with her. Briony followed.

Her stomach churned as the glittering surface grew nearer and brighter. She realized she wasn't singing and reluctantly opened her mouth, adding her voice to the chorus she had practiced so many times in school.

It had never stuck in her throat before.

This was her first feast. She should be excited. She had been training for this her entire life. This was her chance to prove her voice and strength and worth. To join the adult mermaids in a carefree life of magic and music.

The young mermaids burst through the surface of the water, their dark hair gleaming in the sunlight. It was nearly evening, Briony realized with surprise. The setting sun cast a red glow over the ship and the ocean.

Sage Whelk gave another signal, and the mermaids began the second part of their song. The music sounded different in the air than it had in the water. Less harmonious. More ominous.

“Sirens!”

The call echoed through the air as the men on the ship repeated it. There was an emotion in the sailors’ voices that Briony didn’t recognize. Fear? Panic? Or was that how men always sounded? She had never met one. Even now, she could only see glimpses of them as they rushed over the ship’s deck.

“Sirens! Block your ears!”

Briony stopped singing in surprise. Block your ears? Why would the men say such a thing? Didn’t they want to hear the song the mermaids had prepared for them?

She backed away from the ship so she could see what was happening on the deck. The men huddled in a group, linking arms and pressing their hands over their ears. For a moment, the commotion stilled. The men stood frozen in place, staring down at the water and the mermaids.

Then one of the sailors broke away from the group. He pushed aside the men who tried to hold him back, ran across the ship, and jumped over the railing. He hung in the air for a moment, then crashed into the ocean. The water boiled as mermaids struggled to grab him. Everyone wanted the honor of claiming the first prey.

Cuttle threw an elbow into Conch’s nose, wrapped her arms around the man, and disappeared beneath the water.

“Sing, girls!” Sage Whelk scolded. “There are plenty left.”

The mermaids nodded and resumed their song. Some men closed their eyes and kept their hands pressed over their ears. Some reached for friends caught in the spell and tried to pull them back.

None of it did any good. Briony saw the moment the song took each of them. The moment they stopped worrying about themselves or their friends

and decided to jump.

She saw the helpless expressions of those who were left on the deck, holding their hands over their ears as tightly as they could.

“That’s enough for today,” Sage Whelk yelled once most of the sailors had jumped. “Briony, what are you doing all the way over there? Pick your man and make sure to hold him tight!”

The water churned as mermaids grabbed men and pulled them under the water. Almost without realizing what she was doing, Briony followed Sage Whelk’s instructions and let her training take over as she grabbed the nearest sailor. She sang the song she had practiced with the others. The song for calming and soothing. The man in her arms stopped struggling and smiled at her. Bubbles streamed from his mouth as Briony pulled him under the water.

She looked around as she sank deeper into the ocean. Bubbles streamed up from all the men they had grabbed. Were those glittering orbs their souls? Was that what would float into the air and above the stars?

Lyra held two men, one under each arm. They were almost twice her size, but they didn’t struggle. Briony stopped singing as she stared in surprise. Lyra really had broken with tradition and taken two men for her feast. The little mermaid’s eyes glittered with excitement.

When Briony’s singing stopped, the man in her arms turned from a limp weight to a struggling mass of arms and legs. He kicked and clawed, and Briony lost her grip on him.

He swam toward the surface, and she watched him go in surprise. He was chasing the bubbles, she realized. Chasing the air that had escaped him. Perhaps men were sons of air just as mermaids were daughters of water.

Briony blinked as the realization hit her with the force of a tidal wave. Without air, this man would die. She had almost killed him.

She kicked her tail and sped toward the man. Legs really were no good in the water. He wasn’t swimming fast enough, but she could help him. She could save him.

But when Briony reached the man and tried to wrap her arms around him to pull him to the surface, he struggled and pushed her away. She tried again, and he kicked her in the stomach.

“You have to sing to keep them docile, Briony. Don’t you remember your training?”

Sage Whelk appeared by her side and sang the calming song. The man's hand broke the surface of the water, splashed a moment, and went limp. Sage Whelk grabbed his foot and dragged him down before his head broke the surface. Before he could get the air he so desperately needed.

She brought the enchanted man back to a stunned Briony and pushed him toward her.

"It's alright, dear. Many mermaids lose focus in the excitement of their first feast. You'll be fine as long as you keep singing."

She noticed Lyra struggling with the weight of the two men in her arms and swam toward her with a sigh. As soon as Sage Whelk turned her back, Briony grabbed the man and swam toward the surface. But it was too late. Even without her song, he remained limp in her arms.

He was dead.

Briony stared at his face. At his empty eyes. They were accusing her of something, although she didn't know what. Beyond the obvious, of course. She had cut his already short life even shorter.

Briony bit her lip. Why should she feel guilty about this? Her people had hunted men like this for centuries. Surely there was nothing wrong with it.

Besides, men had eternal souls. They would float above the stars to heaven, which sounded like a nice place. Their lives were short. Perhaps she had only robbed this man of a few days.

Briony pushed her doubts away and swam down into dark waters to find the others. It was difficult to swim with the man in her arms. The cloth wrapped around him dragged in the water and slowed her down. Warmth seeped from his body until his skin was as cold as the water around them.

"There you are, Briony," Sage Whelk said. "Now we can begin. Everyone watch carefully!"

The school gathered around and watched Sage Whelk place her hands on a drowned sailor's cheeks and hold his face just in front of hers.

"Sage Chiton told me that you all discussed how to win an immortal soul earlier."

Lyra swam closer, struggling with the weight of her men. She was the only mermaid who had captured two sailors. Conch, Coral and Cuttle glared at her as they tightly gripped their own prey. They were clearly not happy to have been bested, and Lyra's smug expression said that she knew it.

“Yes, it is possible to earn a soul through true love,” Sage Whelk said. “But why give a man a choice? Men may give you their soul while they are alive, or you may take it from them when they are dead. The second way is far easier.”

The sage pulled the dead man closer and pressed her lips to his. The sailor’s body glowed silver like a star, and the mermaids gasped. Briony stared with wide eyes. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. What a gift, to see the immortal soul she would never possess.

Then, to Briony’s horror, the light began to fade. It did not fly up to heaven, but instead traveled into Sage Whelk’s body as if pulled by a current it couldn’t escape. It passed through the mermaid’s face, illuminating her pearly skin before settling in her hair.

Briony’s stomach churned as she realized why all the older mermaids had such beautiful silver hair. Why mermaids lived longer than humans.

They stole their souls.

The sailor’s body grew dull and dark and withered as Sage Whelk pulled every last drop of soul from his body. By the time she threw him away, he was little more than a husk. The mermaid glowed with renewed energy and light. Her hair glistened like stars pulled down to earth, lighting the water around them.

“Now you try,” Sage Whelk said.

Lyra wrapped her tail around one of her sailors and hastily kissed the other. The man glowed as his soul passed from his body. A single streak of silver appeared in Lyra’s dark hair.

Silver light filled the ocean as the rest of the school followed her example. Everyone pulled the sailors close for a deadly kiss.

Everyone but Briony.

She backed away, carrying the drowned sailor with her. She couldn’t leave him here to be sucked dry. She would find a way to free his soul. The mermaids were too busy with their feast to notice her departure. Those who had finished feasting twirled their hair around their fingers, admiring the new streak of silver. They sang, trying out the new magic and strength in their voices.

Briony turned away from the celebration and swam at top speed until she reached the shore. The man in her arms was a son of earth and air in

life. Surely he belonged there in death rather than at the bottom of the ocean.

“I’m sorry,” Briony said.

Water ran from her dark hair to her face, mixing with tears as she pulled the man as far up the beach as she could. She stared at him, waiting for his soul to leave his body and fly to the stars, but nothing happened. He simply lay there, still and silent on the sand.

Perhaps his soul needed help. Mermaids pulled men’s souls from their bodies with a kiss. She could try that, but his soul would flow into her rather than up to the stars.

She couldn’t do that to this man.

Briony grabbed a sharp stone from the shore and pressed it to her lips, making a tiny cut that shed a single drop of dark blue blood. The stone shimmered with magic until it glistened like the glass that sometimes sank to the bottom of the ocean. Briony pressed the stone to the man’s lips and sighed in relief as he began to glow in the moonlight.

She pulled the stone away and watched his soul dance like a silver ribbon in the wind. It flew higher and higher until the end of the ribbon disappeared into the stars. Some of it circled around Briony, and memories drifted through her mind as if they were her own. Waving fields of wheat and the sound of the wind blowing through them. A small house. Two elderly humans, a male and female, their skin wrinkled and hair white. They waved goodbye to the man as he stepped onto the ship.

Briony sobbed as the man’s life washed over her. This was not the hundred years of toil that Sage Chiton had described. This was love. There was beauty on land, just as there was beauty in the ocean. And there was a warmth there that the cold depths could never know.

She sat with him, keeping watch until the last strand of his soul left his body and soared into the sky. She sat with him even after that, unsure what to do.

She couldn’t stay here much longer. Word of the lost ship would travel fast. The first thing the humans would do was search the shore. She had seen that in the man’s memories. He had searched the shore himself several times after ships had been lost to the feast, hoping against hope that someone might survive and be washed ashore.

No, she couldn’t stay here. Land was no place for a mermaid. Humans would have no love for a monster who had killed a man. She saw that now.

But could she go home? Go back to the mermaids who had just finished feasting on men like this one? Use her voice to steal men’s lives and souls just to gain magic?

Something splashed down the beach. Briony looked up in alarm. Had the humans found her already?

But it was only a small seal, his speckled wet fur glistening silver in the moonlight. He bounced toward her, moving along the shore with far more grace than she had crawled up it. Maybe she could learn how to move on land more efficiently by watching seals.

He barked at her, bright eyes glistening.

“Quiet,” Briony whispered.

“Arf!”

“Hush!”

“Arf!”

“Fetch!”

Briony threw her stone into the waves, drawing on a memory of a human game that the man’s soul had shared. He had played that game with a creature called a dog, which looked somewhat similar to the seal.

It worked. The seal dove into the water to chase the rock.

All that splashing might attract people. She should go. Briony crossed the man’s arms over his chest and closed his eyes by running her fingers over them. She had seen that in a memory as well. This was how humans buried their dead.

Then she crawled across the beach and dove into the water.

The seal swam toward her, carrying the stone. Briony sighed. Of course, fetch meant bringing the object back. She took the stone and noticed how the rock glistened and glowed. Had it absorbed some of the man’s soul when she freed it?

No, the color was too dark to be a human soul. The deep blue was the same color as her blood. Briony stared. Somehow, this rock had absorbed her magic when she freed the man’s soul.

The seal nudged her, eager to play again. Briony grabbed a nearby rock and threw it. The seal swam happily after it, and she returned to studying the stone.

Magic. Somehow, she had enchanted this stone with magic. She hadn't sung a note or taken a soul, but she had worked magic.

She swam deeper. The stone glowed even brighter in the deep water. At this depth, Briony could see hints of purple mixed with the blue. Her magic. She grinned. She had magic. A kind of magic no mermaid before her had ever discovered.

"Briony!"

Briony looked up and saw a silver glow moving toward her. Sage Chiton. Briony shuddered and tried not to think about how many men's souls were needed to make her teacher's hair glow so brightly.

"Briony, we've been looking everywhere for you! What happened? Your hair-"

Briony grimaced. Even if she wanted to hide what she had done, she couldn't. Her hair was still dark. There was no streak of silver.

"I couldn't do it," Briony said. "I took him to shore and freed his soul instead."

She held up the glowing rock, and Sage Chiton gasped.

"Freed his soul?"

More mermaids appeared and stared at Briony. Sage Whelk joined Sage Chiton, and their hair lit the ocean like the lanterns Briony had seen in the man's memories. Her classmates' streaks of silver were more like flickering candles. Most of her schoolmates had one. Lyra had two.

"Where's your silver?" Conch asked. "Wasn't your voice strong enough?"

She tossed her hair, showing off her own strand of glistening silver hair.

"I won't do it," Briony said. "I won't feast."

Sage Whelk looked at her in confusion.

"If you don't feel ready, you can go back to school. We'll be starting a new class soon."

"No."

The last thing Briony wanted to do was to sit on that uncomfortable rock and listen to lectures.

"There are other ways to use magic," she said. "We don't have to steal the souls of men!"

"Steal?" Coral said with a grin. "Those men gave their souls very willingly."

“Just come home, Briony,” Sage Chiton said. “It’s perfectly normal to be nervous about feasting. We can help you.”

“I won’t go home,” Briony said. “I won’t be a part of this. I have my own magic, and I don’t need yours.”

She turned and swam away. The mermaids called to her but didn’t follow. Briony swam until she couldn’t hear their voices anymore. Swam until their silver glow melted into darkness.

Something bumped into her. Briony dropped her enchanted stone in surprise. The thing grabbed it and swam quickly away.

“Hey!”

She followed the stone’s glow as the creature swam toward the surface. The water grew lighter, so that Briony could see what had taken her stone.

The seal.

He climbed out of the water onto a jagged rock island not far from the coast where she had left the man’s body. Waves crashed against the island, white foam on black rock. The seal dropped the stone in front of him and looked at Briony expectantly. She picked it up and felt a warmth that was both strange and familiar. There really was magic in this stone.

She grabbed a different rock from the island and threw it for the seal.

“Fetch!”

The seal pup dove off the ledge and swam down to find the stone. Briony pulled herself onto the island and studied the stone in her hands. Magic. There were other ways to work magic.

“I’ll find them,” she said, looking up at the stars. “I won’t steal another man’s life, but I will learn magic. My magic.”

The seal returned with the rock, and Briony threw it for him again.

“Fetch, Pup!”

The seal barked, as if delighted with his new name, and chased the rock under the waves. Briony followed and was surprised to find that the rocky island was much bigger under the water than above it. It spread and stretched all the way to the ocean floor.

Mountain. The word floated through her mind along with a memory of a similarly shaped mass of rock on land. The one on land was green and covered with flowers. It had holes in it. Caves.

Briony lifted her glowing stone and realized that her underwater mountain also had holes in it. Underwater tunnels and caverns.

Briony swam through them, running her hands over the rock and using the enchanted stone's glow to light the way. She stopped when her tunnel gave way to a larger opening. Stone columns stretched from the top to the bottom of the cavern. The sides were jagged, forming nooks and crannies. They reminded her of something she had seen in the man's memories.

Shelves.

The word drifted through her mind as if she had always known it. This cavern had natural shelves.

Another memory drifted through her. Shelves lined with glistening glass bottles.

"Potions," Briony whispered as she ran her hand over a shelf.

The man's memories told her that the potions in those bottles had the power to heal. It was a different kind of magic. Something humans knew and mermaids didn't.

Well, mermaids didn't know it until now.

Bottles filled with magic. Was it possible?

There was only one way to find out.

Briony sank onto the floor and lifted the glowing stone to light the cavern. She stared at the empty space. At the dark rock all around her. It might take years to realize her vision. To learn how to make potions and fill these stone shelves with them.

Luckily for her, she had plenty of time and plenty of magic.

"Welcome home," she whispered to herself.

CHAPTER 3

Briony held a small glass bottle in one hand and a strand of luminescent seaweed in the other. She bit her lip in concentration as she pinched the seaweed and squeezed. A single drop of glowing blue liquid fell from the seaweed. Rather, it floated away from it. The memories that had taught her about potions had not included instructions for making them underwater, but Briony had perfected the process over the years. She had learned how to sense the magical properties of plants. How to strengthen them with her own innate magic. How to combine the ingredients she found into something entirely new.

Briony scooped the blue drop into the bottle and stuffed a cork into the opening to make sure the liquid couldn't escape.

She grinned, enjoying her triumph for a moment, and shook the bottle to break up the drop of glowing liquid and mix it with the seawater. The blue glow diffused throughout the bottle, casting a soft light through the underwater cavern that Briony now called home.

Something rushed into the cavern and swam around her, casting a hazy shadow against the glowing bottles that lined the walls.

Briony lifted her stone knife in defense, then relaxed as the shape slowed enough for her to recognize it.

"Pup, don't scare me like that."

The seal pressed a whiskery kiss onto her forehead and swam toward the opening with a significant look.

"Fine. Fetch!"

Briony threw the enchanted stone out of the cavern. The seal darted after it, and Briony turned back to her potion. The luminescent seaweed was hard to find and lost potency quickly once it was harvested. If she didn't finish the potion now, she would have to start the process over. That meant swimming three days into the depths and searching the dark canyons where the seaweed grew.

Briony pulled a bottle of dull brown paste from a shelf and shook out a few drops. They sank, heavier than the water. She pulled the cork from the bottle of seaweed juice, scooped up the sinking brown globs, and replaced the cork with a practiced motion.

She grinned. Not a drop wasted. Most of her potion ingredients were difficult to find. Much more difficult to obtain than the human souls the other mermaids used for their magic.

Briony shuddered and glanced at her wall of potions. Her reflection looked back at her, glittering and distorted on the surface of hundreds of bottles. Her hair was still dark. Her face was pale, which only made her hair look darker in contrast. Her eyes were dark as well and had small lines around them that even the sages didn't have. A mermaid her age should have smooth skin and completely silver hair. Her former classmates did. Briony saw them sometimes, glowing in the distance, when she went out to collect ingredients for her potions.

They saw her too, but they always swam the other way. There was a new school now, and the young mermaids screamed and scattered whenever they saw Briony. Had they been warned to avoid her?

"Witch."

Cuttle had said that once as Briony swam past. It was the only word a mermaid had spoken to Briony since she left. Briony had thought about it for days afterward as she mixed her potions. Finally, she had decided the word suited her. She was a witch. A sea witch. And she didn't want to be anything else.

Briony pushed the memory away and pulled a golden flower petal from another bottle. She added this to the potion and shook the bottle again. The petal dissolved, and the color changed from the blue-green of the seaweed to a pale pink with tinges of gold. Briony poured a drop of the liquid into the sea where it floated in front of her like a tiny jellyfish. She scooped it into an empty bottle, shook it to dilute the potion into the seawater, and

stuffed a cork in the opening. She repeated the process until a neat row of glowing new potions sat on her shelf.

Briony retrieved the piece of luminescent seaweed and squeezed another drop from it. She grinned at the bit of blue floating in the water. There was enough left to make another batch.

Pup returned with the glowing stone, dropped it into Briony's hand, and circled around her. He nudged her hand, knocking the potion bottle from it. The bottle floated gently to the cavern floor, and Briony sighed as she looked at the seal.

"Can it wait?"

Pup swam behind her and pushed her toward the cavern opening. Briony sighed. She wouldn't be able to finish the potion with Pup bothering her. She had trained the seal to help her find potion ingredients. Maybe something interesting had drifted nearby. If they hurried, she could retrieve whatever it was and make it back in time to complete the second batch of potions before the seaweed spoiled.

"Lead the way."

Pup darted out of the cavern, and Briony followed. Her heart raced when she saw the silver glow on the distant horizon.

The mermaids were feasting.

Briony flicked her tale and swam alongside Pup. The mermaids sometimes missed men in their feasts. Had Pup located a survivor?

No, probably not a survivor. Men sometimes escaped the mermaids' notice in the frenzy of the feast, but Briony had yet to find a man who could survive the sea. Sometimes the bodies caught in a current and washed away before the mermaids found them. In that case, Briony brought them to shore and released their souls so they could fly to the stars. It was the least she could do, and the memories the souls shared had taught her a lot over the years.

She tightened her grip on her enchanted stone as she followed the seal. She expected Pup to lead her toward the feast, but instead the seal led her to the shore. Briony peeked above the waves and saw a dark shape on the moonlit sand. A body.

How had it washed ashore so quickly? Or was this man from a different shipwreck? Or simply an unfortunate swimmer caught in a current?

No matter how he had been caught in the sea, she could still help him.

The man coughed, and Briony ducked below the waves. He was alive! At least, he was alive for now. Could she save him?

She raced along the coast until she reached the outcropping of rocks where she stashed supplies for her infrequent trips to land to gather ingredients she couldn't get in the sea.

Hands trembling, Briony pried the cork out of a small potion bottle filled with an older batch of the same pink-gold potion she had just finished mixing. She swallowed it in a single gulp. The magic worked quickly, turning her tail into two human legs. She slipped on the dress and cloak she had stashed in the cove and pulled the hood low over her face. She had learned that most humans didn't walk around with soaking wet hair, so she covered it whenever possible.

She stuffed a few potion bottles into her pocket and ran down the beach. The glass clanked against her leg as she ran.

Briony sank to her knees when she reached the man. He was still breathing. She glanced over his body quickly, checking for injuries. She didn't see anything, but his breathing was shallow.

Internal injuries, perhaps? Or had he swallowed too much seawater?

She reached for the potions in her pocket and ran her fingers over the glass. She had created a healing potion for herself, but it was designed to heal mermaids. It might not work on humans, and it would do nothing to help if the problem was seawater.

The other potion seemed more likely. Briony made her decision and closed her hand around the bottle.

Please, let it be seawater.

Briony uncorked the bottle and poured a few drops into the man's mouth. She had created this potion to help Pup stay underwater longer. It didn't let the seal breathe water as the mermaids did, but it did extend how long his air lasted between each breath. Could it also keep a man from drowning?

"Please, wake up," she whispered.

She resisted the urge to pour the whole bottle down his throat. Too much potion would do as much harm as too little. Instead, Briony took one of his hands and rubbed it between her own. His skin was cold. Perhaps the sea would claim him after all. Perhaps she had come too late to save him,

just as she had been too late to save that sailor at her first and only feast so many years ago.

Then the man coughed. Seawater mixed with a thin streak of Briony's glowing magic dribbled from his lips, and he opened his eyes.

They were light gray but shone silver in the moonlight, almost the same color as all the souls Briony had released to fly up to heaven. Was his soul shining through his eyes? She had never looked a living man in the eyes before, so she didn't know. Perhaps all men's eyes glowed silver like this one.

Briony stared, completely enchanted. Was this the power of an immortal soul in a mortal body? He was far more beautiful than anything she had ever seen in the sea. His skin was darker than her own. The sun made it darker. She had learned that from memories. Humans lived in a world of sunlight that kissed their skin. His hair was almost as dark as hers but cut short. It curled in loose spirals around his head.

No sign of silver in his hair. He must carry his entire soul in those captivating eyes.

The man seemed equally captivated as he stared at her. The moments between their heartbeats stretched longer than usual, until Briony felt she had been staring at him for hours.

She blinked and looked away, deliberately breaking the spell.

"Are you well?"

It was a foolish question. Of course he wasn't well. He had been shipwrecked and nearly died. But Briony didn't know what else to say. Her borrowed memories had taught her the human language, but not what to say to someone who had almost drowned.

"Perfect," he answered.

His voice was deep and musical. He tried to sit up, winced, and sank back into the sand.

"Perfect?" Briony asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, maybe not quite perfect."

He laughed. It turned into a cough, and more seawater dribbled from his lips. He wiped it away with his sleeve and grimaced.

"Sorry. I'm making a horrible first impression."

"As long as you're alive, you have an opportunity to make a better second one."

He grinned at her, and Briony smiled back. Talking with a human was easier than she had expected it to be. The man tried to sit up again and fell back with a groan.

“You didn’t learn your lesson the first time?” Briony asked.

“Apparently not. Help me sit up?”

He would be better off resting, but he would also hurt himself if he kept trying to sit up and flopping back in the sand like a beached whale. Briony slid an arm under his shoulders and helped him sit upright. He wavered for a moment, then found his balance and stared out at the ocean.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. I found you on the shore.”

Liar. She knew exactly what had happened. Judging by the sad look in the man’s eyes, he knew it as well.

“We stuffed cotton in our ears,” he said. “I thought it would be enough to block their songs.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Those blasted sirens-”

Hate blazed in his eyes, and Briony swallowed. Thank goodness she had taken the time to transform herself with a potion. She couldn’t bear for this man to think that she was one of the monsters who had attacked his ship.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. What else could she do?

“You saved me,” he said, fixing those beautiful silver eyes on her again. “What were you doing out here so late?”

Briony shrugged.

“I was walking along the beach.”

“Well thank goodness you were.”

He wanted to ask more. Questions were written all over his face, but he didn’t ask them. Instead he tried to stand. Briony protested, but he shook his head.

“I have to get home. They might send out a rescue ship. I can’t let them do that.”

“They don’t usually send rescue ships.”

“They might for me. I can’t risk it.”

He scrambled to his feet and took a few unsteady steps. Briony caught him before he fell, and he gave her a rueful look.

“I don’t suppose you could walk me back to town? I don’t seem able to stand on my own.”

“It would be better for you to rest,” Briony said.

But she didn’t try to stop him. If he truly thought more lives were at risk, he would probably crawl back to the town on his hands and knees. Were all humans that committed to saving their fellow men?

Perhaps that kind of consideration for others came naturally to those with immortal souls.

Briony felt suddenly empty. None of her fellow mermaids had showed this level of concern for her when she left all those years ago. They had not tried to save her. They had not asked her to come home. Instead they called her a witch and swam the other way.

“You’re crying,” the man said. “Are you alright?”

Briony wiped her eyes and scrambled for an excuse.

“It’s nothing. My feet hurt.”

The man looked down and gasped.

“You left your shoes on the beach. I’m so sorry. I didn’t give you time to retrieve them.”

Briony looked down and realized with surprise that the sharp rocks had cut her feet. She had been too distracted to notice that she was leaving a trail of blood with each step. Thank goodness it was too dark for the human to see that her blood was dark blue instead of bright red.

“You’re hurt,” he said. “You wait here. I’ll send a doctor.”

The man pulled his arm away from Briony and tried to walk on his own. He stumbled forward and would have fallen flat on his face if she hadn’t caught him.

“You’re hurt far worse,” she said. “Don’t worry about me. Truly, I’m fine.”

She ignored his protests and kept walking, trying hard not to limp. Now that she was aware of the cuts on her feet, it was hard to ignore them. It would be easy enough to heal her injuries with a potion, but she had no idea how this man felt about magic. It would be best to wait until she was alone.

“I owe you a lot,” the man said quietly.

“You owe me nothing.”

She was only trying to make it right. Maybe if she saved this man, it would make up for the man she had killed. She thought of the sailor’s

lifeless eyes and shuddered.

“I’d offer you my cloak, but I’m afraid I lost it in the sea.”

“I have a cloak.”

“Yes, but you’re still cold.”

“I told you not to worry about me. I’m fine.”

“I know a lie when I hear one.”

He stopped and looked at her. Really looked. Briony stared back, watching him watch her. No one had ever taken the time to study her like this. The man’s arm was warm around her shoulders, a gentle weight as he used her for balance.

“Hello? Are you alright?”

A voice rang through the night and broke whatever spell the man had been weaving. Strange, Briony thought. He hadn’t said anything or used a potion, and yet his magic had warmed something in her that she hadn’t realized was cold. Was this also the power of an immortal soul?

“Who’s there?” the man called out.

A figure emerged from the darkness and gasped when he saw the man.

“You’re alive! How are you alive?”

The newcomer, a man about the same size as the one she had rescued, looked at Briony with curiosity.

“She’s hurt,” Briony’s man said. “We need a doctor.”

“You’re hurt worse,” Briony said.

“They’re preparing a rescue ship,” the second man said. “I told them not to, but you know how they are.”

Briony’s man swore, then looked at her apologetically.

“I must get to town, and I need to hurry.”

“Then go,” she said.

“But your feet-”

The second man looked at Briony’s bleeding feet and shook his head.

“She won’t be able to keep up. Wait here, miss. We’ll send a doctor for you.”

“We can’t leave her alone!” Briony’s man protested.

“I’ll be fine,” Briony said. “Go.”

She limped to a nearby rock and sat on it, gesturing for them to go ahead. She had been wondering how she would sneak away once they

reached town. This was the perfect opportunity for her to disappear without causing a fuss.

The man stared at her for a long moment with his silver eyes, then took his companion’s arm and hurried toward town. They were close enough to see the lights sparkling down the road. Golden light, much warmer than the souls. Fire, Briony remembered. The humans had a magic called fire that they used to light the night and banish the cold.

She waited until the man and his friend were out of sight, then pulled a potion bottle from her pocket and took a drink. The magic worked quickly, easing the pain in her feet and knitting the skin back together.

When the healing was finished, Briony stood and ran all the way back to the sea.

CHAPTER 4

Briony stopped to pick a few white flowers growing along the shore and returned her dress and cloak to the rocky crevice that was their hiding place. She looked back at the moonlit shoreline, studying it a moment before she swallowed a mouthful of potion and dove into the sea.

She inhaled salt water and sputtered as she sank beneath the waves. The taste grew less and less salty as her body transformed. When the briny taste disappeared completely, Briony knew the transformation was complete. She wrapped her hands around the flowers, sheltering them as she kicked her tail and swam. These only bloomed in the moonlight and were difficult to find. They would be perfect for a new potion she was working on.

Briony frowned as she approached her mountain. A bright glow leaked out from the tunnels and cracks in the stone. Had her new potions escaped from their bottles? Had Pup broken something while looking for a toy?

She swam into the cavern and froze in surprise. The white flowers fell from her hands and drifted slowly to the floor as she stared at the glowing figure floating in her cavern.

“Lyra?”

The little mermaid was still little, but she had an air of power that went beyond physical size. Her face showed no signs of aging, and her hair glowed so brightly that it looked white instead of silver. Briony thought of the two men Lyra had grabbed at their first feast. The two streaks of silver that had appeared in her hair.

How many souls had she devoured since then? Lyra’s hair was brighter than any mermaid’s hair that Briony had ever seen. Brighter than even Sage

Whelk’s and Sage Chiton’s. It shouldn’t be possible, especially in a mermaid so young.

How many souls would never reach the stars because they had been trapped by a soul-hungry mermaid?

“I want a potion.”

Briony blinked at Lyra and tightened her grip on the enchanted stone. She had never used it as a weapon, but the edges were sharp, and it was infused with her magic. Could it save her in a fight?

Lyra laughed.

“Don’t look so scared, Briony. If anything, I should be scared of you.”

“What?”

“You’re infamous now, didn’t you know? All the sages warn their schools about you. Don’t go near the sea witch, they say. She’ll gouge out your eyes and use them in her wicked brews.”

Lyra struck a pose, making a face that was probably supposed to look wicked. But even contorted into a snarl, her face was beautiful. Her brilliant hair lit her skin with an angelic glow.

Briony sighed. That explained why the mermaids always swam away from her. The sages had made her an example in their lessons. Who knew what they said about her? Only her schoolmates knew the truth.

“What do you want, Lyra?”

Briony held Lyra’s gaze as she reached to a shelf above her and retrieved an inky black potion. It was a defensive brew: a drop of her blood mixed with squid ink and a few other things. It would flood the cavern with darkness and allow Briony time to escape if Lyra attacked.

Briony held the potion and the enchanted stone in front of her. The potion and stone seemed to absorb the little mermaid’s light, creating a shadow that surrounded Briony and sheltered her from that silver glow.

Lyra laughed.

“Don’t be silly, Briony. I have no desire to test my magic against yours. I just want a favor.”

Her glittering silver eyes said otherwise. She wouldn’t leave without getting the thing she wanted.

“What favor?”

Briony swished her tail and swam a little closer to Lyra. The shadow cast by the potion followed her. She looked into Lyra’s silver eyes and saw

her own reflection. Briony was surprised by how ominous she looked. She was a cloud of darkness, as if a bit of the depths had been brought into moonlight. The magic was an extension of herself.

A quick glance to the side showed Briony the scene reflected in the many other potion bottles. She grinned. No wonder the other mermaids avoided her. She looked intimidating. The enchanted stone looked more like a knife, sharp edges glittering with that dark magic that only Briony knew.

Next to the sea witch, Lyra looked small and innocent. The little mermaid was a drop of light, a small star twinkling in the night sky.

Briony made a quick mental note of which potions might be useful in a fight then turned back to Lyra. She might look more threatening than her unwanted guest, but she couldn't let her guard down.

Lyra may be small, but she was powerful. Her voice resonated with magic even when she spoke. What magic could she unleash if she sang?

"I've fallen in love," Lyra said in her magical, musical voice.

"Congratulations."

Briony didn't bother to keep the sarcasm from her voice, but Lyra only laughed.

"I mean it! I've fallen in love with a human man. He wants to share his immortal soul with me, but he can't do that while I'm trapped in the ocean."

Briony froze. That was impossible. What human could love a monster who ate his brother's souls?

Unless he didn't know. Had Lyra grown strong enough to use her voice to enchant a man into truly loving her?

If she had, she was more dangerous than ever.

"I want legs," Lyra said. "I know you have magic that lets you walk on land like a human. I want it so I can be with my love and share his immortal soul."

"If he shares his soul with you, you won't need my magic."

"Yes, well, that's the difficulty. He loves me, but he doesn't know that I'm a mermaid."

"How can he truly love you if he doesn't know you're a mermaid? Remember what Sage Chiton said. He must love you more than his father and mother to share his immortal soul with you."

"He does," Lyra said with complete confidence. "I saved him from the sea, and he belongs to me."

“That doesn’t sound like the love Sage Chiton described.”

“Sage Chiton is gone. She became sea foam ages ago.”

Briony felt a conflicted sadness at this news. While she hadn’t agreed with Sage Chiton’s feasting, the mermaid was also responsible for Briony’s knowledge of souls and her path in life. She had been Briony’s mentor, even if her lessons had not had the effect the teacher intended.

“I’m sorry,” Briony said.

Lyra shrugged.

“She lived her three hundred years and was content with that. I refuse to be. A man loves me and wants to share his soul with me. I want to let him so I can live forever.”

“That doesn’t sound like love.”

“What do you know of love? You live alone making potions and don’t talk to anyone. What do you know of love and souls and the hearts of men?”

Briony thought of the man she had walked with back to town but said nothing. She may know men better than Lyra, but the mermaid was right. Briony still knew little of men and nothing of love.

But she did know something of souls.

“I simply want to be with the man I love and share his soul,” Lyra said. “Surely you can lend me one potion to help that happen?”

She waved her hand at the hundreds of bottles lining the cave walls. They glittered in a rainbow of colors. Briony’s life work.

Lyra wouldn’t stop. Briony looked into her silver eyes and found only hard determination there. If the little mermaid wanted an immortal soul, she would not stop until she got one. If it came to a fight, Lyra would fight.

And even if Briony won, there would be a price from such a conflict.

“He loves me,” Lyra said, her voice lilting until it almost became a song. “He really does. Will you stand in the way of true love?”

Her smile softened, and Briony wanted to believe her. She wanted to believe that a monster could change and be worthy of love.

She wanted to believe it of herself, so she would believe it of Lyra.

But that didn’t mean she would make this easy.

“The spell is painful,” she said. “Land is not soft like the water. Each step on the rocks will feel like knives are cutting your feet.”

She held up her stone knife for emphasis. Lyra nodded.

“I don’t mind pain. Which bottle holds the potion that will turn me human?”

Briony fought the urge to look up at the correct bottle and kept her gaze on Lyra.

“The potion has limits. It will only allow you to hold a human form for three days.”

“And after that?”

Briony grimaced, remembering the painful lesson that had almost killed her. Thank goodness for the nearby river and the potion in her pocket.

“You’ll die. If you don’t drink another potion and return to the water by sunset on the third day, you’ll turn to sea foam.”

Lyra considered this as she studied Briony’s grim expression. Finally, she nodded.

“Three days will be plenty of time.”

Why was Lyra so sure of this? And why did she want this man so badly? Briony’s mind raced and settled on a single thought. She couldn’t let Lyra do this. She couldn’t let the little mermaid risk so much, and she couldn’t turn her loose on an island of unsuspecting humans.

But how to change her mind? If death didn’t scare Lyra, what would?

Briony could think of only one thing.

“There’s something else. My magic is designed to work only for me. I will need a part of you to adapt the spell to your body.”

“What do you need?”

“Your voice.”

For the first time, doubt crept into Lyra’s eyes. Briony held her gaze, willing Lyra to believe the deception. It was a nasty trick, but it was the only way to turn Lyra away from her plan. No mermaid would willingly give up her voice. Especially not a power-hungry one like Lyra.

“My voice.”

Lyra spoke flatly, searching Briony’s face for any sign of deception. Briony held her gaze. Perhaps she could win this battle after all.

“Fine,” Lyra said. “He loves me. He will recognize me and kiss me without me having to say a word. Then I won’t need your magic. Will you return my voice to me when that happens?”

Briony fought to keep her surprise from showing. Would Lyra really give up her voice to get what she wanted?

She needed to raise the stakes. The sages had spread rumors that Briony gouged out mermaid's eyes. Perhaps that gruesome reputation would prove useful.

"I can't pull your voice from your body and put it back so easily," Briony said. "I'll have to cut out your tongue."

Lyra's silver eyes grew wide with shock, and Briony relaxed a little. Lyra believed her, and there was no way she would agree to these terms. She would go back to the other mermaids and forget this foolish quest.

But Lyra nodded.

"Whatever you need to do, do it. Will you at least agree to return my tongue to me when the man shares his soul? I will find a way to reattach it so I can speak to my love."

Now it was Briony's turn to stare in shock. Was Lyra really willing to cut out her tongue to be with this man? Perhaps she was speaking the truth. Perhaps they really did love each other.

Perhaps Briony was a villain after all, demanding that the little mermaid sacrifice her tongue and her magic for a chance to be with the man she loved.

Or maybe Lyra was bluffing. Proving that she was willing to make the sacrifice with the hope that Briony would cave and say it wasn't necessary.

If that was the case, it almost worked.

And yet, Briony couldn't allow Lyra to walk among men with her voice intact. Judging by her brilliant hair, she wiped out whole ships when she feasted. She could wipe out whole villages if the mood struck her. Taking her voice was the only way to protect the humans while giving Lyra what she wanted. While it wasn't strictly speaking the only price that would work, it was the only one Briony would accept.

"Lyra, are you sure about this?" Briony said. "Aren't you happy in the sea? You have a strong voice. You have magic and music and your schoolmates. Why do you need this human?"

"He's mine," Lyra said. "I won't be kept from what is mine. Promise you'll return my tongue after he shares his soul with me."

Briony stared into the little mermaid's silver eyes and nodded.

"I promise."

Lyra opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue. Briony swallowed. Her own tongue felt like a lump of sand in her mouth, and her stomach

churned. Could she really do this?

She turned to the shelves and swam along the wall, taking her time as she looked for an empty bottle large enough to fit the tongue. She passed several suitable ones as she tried to buy herself time and think of a way to get out of this.

“Stop stalling,” Lyra said.

The little mermaid’s voice was harsh and filled with unspoken threats. Briony gritted her teeth and pulled an empty bottle off the shelf. She pressed it into Lyra’s hands and positioned it under the mermaid’s mouth.

Then, without taking more time to think about what she was doing, Briony ran her stone knife through Lyra’s tongue. The knife glowed bright with magic as the tongue separated from the Lyra’s body. It drifted through the water and landed in the bottle. Briony pushed a cork into the opening and tried not to notice the way silvery blood filled the bottle until it glowed brighter than any of her other potions. The way wisps of silver floated from Lyra’s mouth and drifted toward heaven.

So many souls of so many men.

Lyra noticed the silver and clamped her mouth shut. If the wound hurt, she didn’t show it. Briony swallowed the bile building in her throat as she retrieved one of the bottles of pink-gold magic from the cavern wall. She opened the bottle with the tongue, let out a single drop of silver blood, and scooped the blood into the transformation potion.

Light flashed from the potion as Briony shook it to mix the ingredients. When it was done, the potion glowed brighter and more silver than gold. She handed the bottle to Lyra.

“Swim to the surface first. You’ll only be able to breathe air once you drink this.”

Lyra nodded and kept her mouth pressed shut.

“Remember, you only have three days. If he doesn’t kiss you and share his soul before sunset on the third day, you’ll die.”

Lyra nodded again and cast a significant look at the bottle that contained her tongue. Briony set it on an empty shelf. The silver blood lit the cavern with a soft glow.

“I’ll come to shore every night to check on you, and I’ll return your tongue when you’ve found and kissed your love.”

Their original bargain didn’t include checking on her, but Briony wasn’t willing to leave Lyra unsupervised.

“Oh, you’ll need clothes. Humans are particular about clothes.”

Briony pulled a sodden clump of fabric from a crevice in the wall and pushed it at Lyra. The spare dress had always been too small for her. Perhaps it would suit Lyra better.

Lyra grabbed the dress and swam away without looking back.

Briony leaned against one of the stone columns that stretched from floor to ceiling in her cavern and stared at the silver tongue floating in the bottle. Her stomach churned. She had never hurt anyone with her magic before. Never done anything so vile. She wasn’t sure which was worse: taking Lyra’s tongue or releasing Lyra into the world of men.

She couldn’t stay here. Not with Lyra’s tongue sitting in a jar. Even when she closed her eyes, she could still see the silver glow.

Briony grabbed a bottle of pink-gold transformation potion and swam to shore as fast as she could. Maybe if she swam fast enough, she could put the tongue and Lyra and the past behind her.

CHAPTER 5

Briony swam to shore and drank the potion in a single gulp. She stumbled out of the water as soon as her tail changed to legs. She couldn't stay in the sea right now. Not with Lyra's tongue floating in that bottle of silver blood. Not with the feel of her knife cutting through water and tongue alike still fresh in her hands.

She pulled the dress on and decided to leave the cloak behind. The rising sun and cloudless sky promised a pleasant day that humans would use for picnics and play. She would look suspicious wrapped in a cloak.

Briony remembered her shoes this time. She pulled them on and twisted her wet hair into a tight braid. Then she walked.

She meant to walk along the shore and search the beach for things that had washed up in the tide. Useful things washed up sometimes. Potion ingredients or even bottles.

But the sound of the water taunted her, and she saw Lyra's glowing silver blood in the foam of every wave.

Briony turned away from the ocean and walked further inland. She didn't often go this far ashore, but there was no reason she shouldn't. There was no reason for anyone to be suspicious of a woman walking down a path on such a fine day.

Almost without realizing it, she retraced the path she had followed with the human man and walked toward the town. She didn't even know his name, she realized. She should have asked for his name.

Why? So she could ask after him in town? That would only draw attention to herself. He had been reunited with his friend and taken home.

He was no longer her concern.

Had he sent a doctor after her? Briony's lips twitched as she pictured the doctor searching the woods for a patient he would never find, then she frowned. More likely the man had forgotten all about her. She was easily forgotten. The mermaids had showed her that.

Briony looked up and blinked, realizing she was at the town gate. She hadn't meant to come all the way to the town. She had been lost in her daydreams about the human man and traveled further than she meant to go.

The gate and town looked strangely familiar. Briony had never been here, but she had seen this place in the memories of the souls she saved.

She should go back to the ocean and forget about the man.

Even as she thought that, Briony walked through the gate and entered the town. She half expected someone to stop her. To question why the sea witch dared to come to their home.

No one did. Briony found herself lost in the bustle of a market square that felt both foreign and familiar. Humans of all shapes and sizes stood under small tents with items spread out on blankets all around them. In the memories she had seen, this was a happy place. The humans had called to each other, smiling and laughing and exchanging coins for fruit and fish and things Briony only knew from the memories of others.

Today, a cloud of anxiety hung over the marketplace. The vendors had less to sell on their blankets. No fish. Very little fruit. Worry lined the humans' faces as they haggled with each other and clutched their coins in tight fists.

"Oof!"

Briony looked down to see what had run into her, half expecting to see Pup. Instead, it was a tiny human child no taller than Briony's knees. The girl looked up and smiled. Her hair was a riot of gold, like sunlight captured in curls.

"Do you like my dress? It's my favorite."

The girl let go of Briony and twirled to show off her dress. Briony laughed in spite of herself.

"Vera, there you are!"

A pregnant woman with long dark hair ran over and scooped up the little girl.

“I’m sorry,” she said to Briony. “She doesn’t know the meaning of the word ‘stranger.’“

A man with dark hair just as curly as Vera’s joined them. He wrapped his arm around the woman’s waist as he kissed the girl’s forehead. Then he lifted Vera into his arms and turned to Briony.

Briony stared a moment and realized they expected her to say something.

“It’s fine,” she said. “Nice to meet you, Vera.”

Vera smiled brightly and waved. The family walked away, and Briony watched them until they disappeared into the crowd. A hundred years of toil in the sun. That didn’t look like toil. Or perhaps you didn’t notice the work so much when your life was filled with love.

Briony turned away and kept walking, pushed forward by the crowd. She left the noisy market behind and found herself drawn to the tall ship masts at the end of the street. She had never seen a ship from this angle before. To her, they were dark shadows on the surface of the water.

But here they were graceful towers of wood and rope with sails that danced in the wind.

It was beautiful, but the mood on the docks was even gloomier than the market. Sailor’s faces were drawn and worried. Briony slowed her steps, catching fragments of conversation on the wind.

“Getting worse and worse every year.”

“Can’t even fish now. The sirens-”

“Cotton should have worked. It always worked before.”

This last comment was spoken by a familiar voice. Briony stopped and stared at the man standing on the deck. It was her man.

Not her man, she corrected herself. The man she had helped. That gave her no claim to him.

He looked well, skin glowing warm in the sunlight, hair and clothes rustling in the breeze.

She stood frozen in the street, staring at him. She hadn’t realized until that moment how worried she had been about him. Seeing him alive and well untangled something in her chest so she could breathe freely again. He was safe. Had he made it to town in time to save his friends?

“Get out of the road!”

Briony turned toward the sound and scurried away from the wagon barreling toward her. The driver's shouting halted conversations as everyone turned toward the disturbance.

Including the man.

"Miss! Wait!"

He sprinted down the gangplank and across the street. Briony should have run, but she stood in place instead, waiting for him to come to her. Smiling at the sight of his smile. Noticing that his eyes were gray rather than silver in the daylight.

The man grabbed her hands and looked from them to her face as if searching for injuries.

"Are you well? I sent a search party when the doctor couldn't find you, but you had disappeared!"

"You looked for me?"

"Of course I looked for you. You were injured. That is-"

He cleared his throat and quickly released her hands.

"Will you walk with me, miss? If your feet don't hurt, that is."

He cast a significant look at the ship, where the entire crew was staring at them. Briony understood, and her heart sank. He didn't want to be seen talking to her.

"My feet don't hurt."

"Sailors are terrible gossips," he said. "Let's find a quieter place."

He offered his arm. Briony hesitated a moment before taking it. Perhaps he wasn't ashamed of her after all. Would he offer his arm in front of all the gossiping sailors if he didn't want them to know that he knew her? The memories she had seen told her that this was a somewhat intimate gesture. Lovers often walked arm in arm like this.

Her cheeks flushed. That was a ridiculous thought. He was simply being polite, and it was easier to guide her through town this way.

They walked in companionable silence, the bustle of the market making conversation difficult, until they reached a small gate. The man pulled a key from his tunic and unlocked it. Briony followed him through the opening and found herself in a small garden. Flowers of every shape and color covered the ground and climbed the stone walls. She stared. She had never seen anything like this before, not even in the souls' memories. It was too perfect to be natural. Some human had created this.

“It’s beautiful,” Briony breathed.

She turned a slow circle, studying the garden from every angle. When she turned back to the man, his face was a strange color.

“Are you well?” Briony asked. “Your face is red.”

He laughed in surprise.

“I suppose I’m not used to praise. I usually come here alone.”

“Did you grow these?”

He nodded, and Briony’s eyes widened in appreciation. The man was an artist. He nurtured living things in a way she had never seen. Was this what an immortal soul made possible? Was his creation a reflection of him somehow, just as her magic reflected her?

She remembered Lyra’s tongue, and her face paled. The mermaid was probably human by now, wandering the land and searching for her love.

Briony should have refused her request.

“You’re still unwell,” the man said. “Let me send for a doctor.”

He guided her to a bench and helped her sit down. Briony shook her head.

“It’s nothing. Did you make it home in time last night? Were you able to stop the rescue ship?”

He nodded, and Briony smiled.

“I’m glad.”

“As am I.”

They stared at each other for a moment, and Briony suddenly realized the oddness of the situation. A man had brought her to the place he usually came alone. A man who didn’t even know her name. She had never seen anything like this in the human memories.

“Why did you bring me here?”

“I just- that is-”

He ran a hand through his hair, and Briony watched the curls with fascination. They separated under his fingers and formed new patterns. Another sort of art.

“Call me Harlan,” he said finally. “I’ve made such a mess of this.”

“I’m Briony.”

She held her hand toward him as she had seen humans do when meeting new people in the memories. He grinned and shook her hand. His skin was warm and rough against hers. Nothing like a mermaid’s cool, smooth touch.

“I just wanted to thank you, I guess,” he said. “I don’t want anything from you. I was just happy to see you again. I almost thought you were an angel, the way you appeared to help me then disappeared without a trace.”

“An angel?”

“You know, sent from heaven to help me.”

Briony stared at him, speechless. He thought she came from heaven?

“I’m no angel,” she said, staring at the blades of grass beneath her feet. Even those were strangely perfect, as if they flourished under the man’s magic.

“I’m glad you’re not. That means I get to see you again.”

“You don’t know a thing about me.”

She should tell him, but it was hard to think of the dark ocean and deadly mermaids here in this sun-kissed garden.

“And you don’t know anything about me, do you?” Harlan said.

“I know you’re kind,” Briony said. “I know you care about others. You walked all the way to town even though you were injured because you wanted to check on your friends. So you’re a bit stubborn as well.”

Harlan laughed, and Briony’s tension eased a bit. Something about his smile was so genuine that it put her at ease.

“I think I could say many of the same things about you. You found a stranger on the beach and saved his life, then disappeared without waiting for thanks.”

Briony’s face fell. Somehow, she had deceived this man into thinking she was a good person. He thought her an angel from heaven when she was really a monster of the depths.

“You know about one thing I did. That doesn’t mean you know me.”

Harlan’s expression grew serious.

“You’re right, Briony. I don’t know you. But I would like to, if you don’t mind. I’d like to be friends.”

He paused a bit before saying “friends,” as if he had considered saying something else but settled for friends instead.

“I don’t have friends,” Briony said.

“Not true. You have me.”

He smiled again, and Briony smiled back. His presence was doing strange things to her heart. There was warmth in the cold, empty spot she

usually felt in her chest. It felt like swimming toward the surface and the sun after spending a night in the cold, deep water.

“May I walk you home?” Harlan asked.

Briony stiffened. Home. She didn’t have a home. Not one that she could show him, anyway. Harlan noticed her discomfort again and frowned.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

Briony thought for a moment, studying Harlan’s face as she considered what to tell him.

“I’m going to the beach. You can walk there with me if you want.”

“I’d like that.”

Harlan locked the garden gate behind them, and they walked arm in arm through the city. People stared and stepped aside as they passed. Briony ducked her head at the attention. So much for staying hidden. It seemed the whole city had seen her face by the time they left.

“They’re staring at me,” Harlan finally said. “You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Why are they staring at you?”

“Do you really not know?”

She shook her head, and Harlan looked thoughtful.

“I know, and it’s a simple reason. Do you mind if I don’t tell you yet?”

Briony considered this, then nodded.

“You didn’t press me about my home. I won’t press you about yours.”

Perhaps Harlan was the human version of a witch. Perhaps growing flowers was a forbidden art, which was why he practiced it in secret.

Or maybe the other humans blamed him for surviving the shipwreck when everyone else had died. There were so many reasons people might stare, and Briony found that none of them mattered to her. No matter why they were staring, he was still Harlan.

“I’ll tell you someday,” he said. “I just-”

“You enjoy spending time with someone who doesn’t know,” Briony said.

“Exactly.”

She didn’t need to tell him that she felt the same. He clearly understood.

They walked slowly back toward the ocean. The waves seemed less ominous with Harlan by her side. Briony watched them roll in, no longer seeing imaginary tongues and lost souls in the foam.

“Our ship was taken by sirens,” Harlan said quietly. “I’m the only one who survived, and I don’t understand how or why. Did you see anything when you saved me?”

Briony stared at the water, watching the waves so she didn’t have to look at him as she spoke.

“I only saw you on the beach. I gave you some medicine to help you cough up the sea water you had swallowed. I’m sorry I can’t help more.”

“Help more? You saved my life.”

He turned to face her and took her hands, pulling her close.

“Briony, I-”

Something in the waves caught their eyes. They turned and gasped in unison. A body lay on the beach, face down in the sand.

Harlan reached the body first and rolled it over so the woman looked up to the sky. Briony froze as Harlan brushed away strands of silvery hair and revealed the woman’s face.

It was Lyra.

CHAPTER 6

Briony fell to her knees beside Lyra's body. She sank into the sand, slipping as she searched her pocket for a potion to heal the former mermaid. How had this happened? Lyra had put on the dress. Why hadn't she listened to Briony's other warning?

"Give her this," Briony said.

She pressed the potion bottle into Harlan's hand. He had pulled Lyra's head onto his lap so he could check the pulse in her neck.

He took it and poured the luminous liquid into Lyra's mouth. Briony breathed a sigh of relief when Lyra coughed and spit out sea water. She took the bottle back from Harlan and returned it to her pocket before he had a chance to examine it or ask what it was.

Lyra's silver eyes blinked up at Harlan. She reached her smooth hand up and stroked his cheek. The caress made Briony fidget in discomfort. Lyra had said she loved a human man.

Surely she didn't mean Harlan?

"What happened to you, miss?" Harlan asked.

Was that merely concern in his voice or something more? Briony pushed away the feeling she wasn't quite willing to name.

There was no reason for her to feel jealous.

Lyra tried to speak, then clamped her mouth shut and shook her head.

"I think she's mute," Briony said.

Lyra's eyes, which had been half closed as she fluttered her eyelashes at Harlan, snapped open and darted to Briony. A brief flash of hatred filled her gaze, and she slid closer to Harlan as if asking him for protection.

Harlan’s eyes grew almost as wide as Lyra’s, and he turned to Briony for help as Lyra crawled into his lap.

“Do you know her?” Briony asked. “Is she from your town?”

She knew the second part wasn’t true, but what about the first?

Harlan shook his head.

“I’ve never seen her before.”

He was looking at Briony, so he missed the flash of annoyance in Lyra’s eyes. Briony didn’t.

And her heart sank as she began to understand.

Harlan had not simply been lucky and washed ashore the night his ship sank. No human had ever escaped a feast alive before. He was not the first.

Lyra had saved him. Briony couldn’t imagine why, but Lyra had said that she had saved a human man from the sea. That man must have been Harlan.

“We should get her to a doctor,” Harlan said. “Whatever you gave her seemed to help, but she may have other injuries.”

Lyra glared at Briony again, then pressed closer and wrapped her arms around Harlan. She was clumsy, still getting used to the additional weight that came from being out of the water. She twisted her fingers into his tunic and held tight.

“Oh,” Harlan said in surprise. “It’s alright, miss. We won’t hurt you.”

He tried to stand but couldn’t manage it with Lyra clinging to him. Briony stood and pulled him up, dragging Lyra up with him.

Lyra opened her mouth to protest, but only a few breathy sounds came out. She grimaced in frustration, hissed at Briony, and clung tighter to Harlan.

“I don’t think she likes you,” Harlan said. “It’s alright, miss. Briony is a friend. She won’t hurt you.”

Lyra glared harder at this and hissed again.

“Perhaps you should take her back to town without me,” Briony said. “Can you manage it?”

Harlan looked helplessly at the woman still clinging to him and nodded.

“Can you walk, miss?”

Lyra nodded. She stumbled after Harlan, hands wrapped in his tunic for balance. Briony watched them go until they disappeared around a bend in

the road, then she turned back to the sea and walked along the shore until she reached her secret cove.

She replayed the scene over and over in her head as she swam back to her cavern. If Harlan was the human Lyra loved, there had been some horrible misunderstanding. He didn't remember her. Didn't know that he owed her his life.

Definitely didn't love her.

Briony's cavern still glowed with the silvery light of Lyra's tongue. She stared at it for a moment, then wrapped it in a cloth to hide the light and carried it with her as she swam back toward the shore.

What did she know of love? Not much. Perhaps Harlan had simply been playing along based on some plan Lyra had made when they first met. Or perhaps he wasn't the man after all, and Lyra was simply using him as a convenient way to get into town.

Briony swam to the small cove she and Lyra had designated as a meeting spot and waited. Lyra would come at sunset, and the sun was still high in the sky. But Briony would rather wait here than try to find something else to do.

She reviewed the details of their agreement as she waited. If Lyra came with news that she had found her man and kissed him, Briony would return her tongue.

And if she hadn't found the man? Or had found him but hadn't kissed him? In that case, things would get rather complicated.

Pup found her and demanded a game of fetch. Briony tossed her enchanted stone into the water, laughing as the seal frolicked in the waves and turned flips before he brought it back.

Finally the sun dipped low into the water, tinting it as red as human blood. Briony heard uneven footsteps on the rocks behind her. She looked up and met Lyra's furious silver gaze.

CHAPTER 7

Lyra glared down at Briony. She would be yelling if she had her voice, Briony thought. Screaming with such fury that her whole body glowed silver and the ocean stormed around her.

Without her voice, all she could do was glare.

Wherever Harlan had taken her, they had cleaned her up and given her a new dress. A rather nice dress made of pink silk that complimented Lyra's pale skin and silver hair.

Her hair was no longer a tangled mess but had been neatly brushed and braided in an intricate style.

"You look well," Briony said.

She meant the compliment sincerely, but Lyra rolled her eyes. She walked toward Briony, stumbling over the rocks as she made her way to shore. Her human hosts had given her pink shoes to match the dress. Lovely, delicate slippers. Still Lyra stumbled, walking unevenly and lurching to avoid the sharpest rocks.

"I told you walking hurts," Briony said. "It isn't like swimming, floating weightless in the water."

Lyra glared in response and sank down onto a rock next to Briony. She cast a wistful glance at Briony's tail, then shook her head and went back to glaring.

"How did it go?" Briony asked. "Did you find the man you love?"

She half-hoped Lyra would say no. That would mean it wasn't Harlan, and there hadn't been a terrible mistake.

Instead, Lyra nodded. Then she crossed her arms and glared at Briony.

Briony sighed. This was going nowhere, but she had to keep trying.

“Did he kiss you?”

Lyra pursed her lips and shook her head. She opened her mouth and pointed at her stub of a tongue.

“That’s not the deal. I can’t return your tongue until he kisses you and shares his soul.”

Lyra pointed at her tongue again and stared at the lump of fabric on Briony’s lap.

“Yes, I brought it just in case.”

Briony pulled out the bottle with Lyra’s tongue to show her. Lyra leaned forward and grabbed it.

“How dare you try to steal my man?”

The voice was faint and pale, like a reflection in the water, but it was unmistakably Lyra’s. Briony tightened her grip on the bottle and looked from the tongue to Lyra’s face.

“How is this possible?”

Lyra shrugged.

“Mermaid voices are magic. Even when separated from our tongues, we can speak if we’re touching them.”

“How did you know that?”

“I did some experiments.”

Briony swallowed the bile that rose in her throat. There was only one logical way to conduct those experiments. She didn’t ask whose tongues Lyra had cut out to test her theory or why she had wanted that particular piece of knowledge in the first place. Maybe Briony should have paid closer attention to what was happening with the other mermaids. Apparently, she had missed a lot.

“What were you doing with my love?” Lyra demanded. *“Why were you trying to seduce him away from me?”*

Briony choked a little before answering.

“Seduce him?”

“I saved him from the feast. He is mine.”

“Harlan doesn’t belong to anyone.”

Lyra shook her head as if Briony was being very stupid.

“He will belong to me once he kisses me and shares his soul. Then you will return my tongue to me.”

She didn’t say what would happen after that. She didn’t need to. Briony swallowed, feeling her own tongue heavy in her mouth. She thought she had avoided a fight with Lyra, but perhaps she had only delayed it. Would her potions be a match for Lyra’s voice? And who knew what other powers the little mermaid had gained in the years that Briony had been away? Apparently she had been experimenting.

“Let me turn you back into a mermaid,” Briony said. “He obviously doesn’t love you. He doesn’t even remember you. This is pointless, Lyra.”

“He doesn’t remember me because you enchanted him. Release your spell, and he will remember that he loves me and wants to share his soul.”

“I enchanted him? That’s ridiculous.”

“Then why did he keep talking about you when we reached his home?”

A small shiver of pleasure ran down Briony’s spine. Harlan had talked about her?

She pushed the feeling away. She was being ridiculous. Nearly as bad as Lyra.

“He doesn’t love me, and he doesn’t love you. Come back to the sea, Lyra.”

Briony pulled a small potion bottle from her pocket and held it toward Lyra.

“This will turn you back into a mermaid, and I’ll give you your tongue once you’ve transformed. You can return home.”

And return to the feast. Briony didn’t say the words, but they hung in the air unspoken. She pushed back her guilt. If Lyra returned to the sea, she would undoubtedly continue feasting. She would kill even more men and steal their immortal souls before they could rise to heaven.

And yet, Briony would help her return. She didn’t want the little mermaid’s death on her hands, and she wanted to get her as far away from Harlan as possible.

Lyra took the bottle from Briony and threw it against the rocks. Swirls of pink and gold ran down into the water, leaving glowing trails behind on the stone.

“Hey!” Briony said. “Do you have any idea how long that takes to make?”

“I don’t want to return to the sea. Not until I have an immortal soul. Not until that man kisses me.”

“He won’t.”

“There is a place where humans go to kiss. A cove hidden by a curtain of trees. I will take him there, and he will kiss me.”

“Lyra-”

“Don’t interfere with my plans, Briony. If you speak to my human again, I’ll make sure you regret it.”

Briony looked from Lyra, glowing silver in the moonlight, to the spilled potion glistening golden on the rocks. Thanks to her visits to Harlan, Briony was going through those potions rather quickly. She didn’t have many left, and Lyra would be sea foam by the time Briony traveled to gather ingredients and made a new batch.

But it seemed Lyra wasn’t interested in the magic anyway.

“He isn’t your human,” Briony said. “I’ll speak to him if I want, and you can’t stop me.”

She pulled the bottle with the tongue out of Lyra’s hands before the mermaid could respond. Lyra sputtered and made a strange hissing sound. She reached for the bottle, eyes burning with anger, but Briony shook her head and wrapped it back up in the cloth.

“Good luck, Lyra. I’ll keep the terms of our deal, but don’t expect any more help from me.”

Lyra glared a moment longer. Then, to Briony’s surprise, she threw back her head and laughed. It was a faint, ghostly sound, somewhere between a sob and a cackle, and it sent chills down Briony’s spine.

Lyra gave Briony a cruel smile, stood slowly, and limped back toward the town.

CHAPTER 8

Briony didn’t sleep well. The glowing tongue lit her grotto with an eerie light, and she kept imagining Lyra’s voice floating from it in faint wisps of song.

There was more going on here than a mermaid trying to win a man’s heart and soul. Lyra wanted more. She had always wanted more.

And thanks to Briony, she was in a position to get it.

Briony gave up on sleep. She grabbed a potion from her diminishing supply and swam toward the shore as fast as she could, leaving the hateful tongue behind in her grotto. Pup joined her on the swim, circling around her and leaping playfully out of the water. Normally Briony would leap with him, but she didn’t have the time or heart to play right now.

She didn’t bother to braid her hair or hide it under a cloak when she reached the shore. She barely took the time to put her dress and shoes on, but she knew from the memories that failing to dress would draw unwanted attention to herself. Humans were particular about things like that.

It was early morning, and the promise of the day hung in the air. Briony jogged up the beach and toward town, putting as much distance between herself and the ocean as possible. She slowed when she saw a figure walking toward her, then quickened again when she realized who it was.

“Harlan!”

“Briony!”

He smiled and rushed toward her. Briony searched his face for any signs of harm but saw nothing. He looked fine.

“Are you going to town?” he asked.

“I was looking for you.”

“What a fortunate coincidence. I was looking for you. Will you walk with me?”

He offered his arm, and Briony took it. If Harlan noticed her wet hair and wrinkled dress, he didn’t comment.

“What did you do with the girl we found on the beach?” Briony asked.

She hoped it was a normal enough question. It wasn’t exactly what she wanted to know, but it would steer the conversation in that direction.

“I brought her home with me, poor thing. I didn’t know what else to do. She seemed completely disoriented. The doctor couldn’t find anything wrong with her feet, but she limps as if she’s walking on broken glass.”

“You gave her new clothes?”

“My servants did.”

“Your servants?”

Briony didn’t mean to say this last bit out loud, but the statement caught her by surprise. Only the wealthiest humans had servants. Was Harlan wealthy? Was he someone important?

The questions, spoken and unspoken, hung in the air between them. Finally, Harlan sighed.

“Yes, my servants. They cleaned her up and prepared a place for her to stay while she recovers. But I found her sleeping outside my door this morning. She followed me around and wouldn’t leave my side. I had to sneak out.”

Briony smirked, imagining Harlan sneaking away from Lyra. The situation was tragic, but also funny. That would teach Lyra to assume love was a thing so easily won. Whatever feelings Lyra had developed, Harlan clearly did not share them.

“I’m sure she’s just lost and confused,” Harlan said. “And I probably seem safe since I’m the one who found her. I’ll give her time to recover then help her find suitable work.”

She would be dead by then, but Briony couldn’t tell Harlan that. To tell what she knew of Lyra’s past was to admit there was more to her own.

“Let’s sit here,” Harlan said.

Briony looked up. They had traveled to an unfamiliar part of the shoreline, some place in the opposite direction of her stash of potions and clothes. Harlan led Briony to a large weeping willow tree that leaned over

the water. He pulled the branches away like a curtain, and she followed him in. The branches created a sort of room around a large, flat rock that jutted into the water. Harlan stepped onto it and reached his hand out to help Briony.

They sat beside each other, the sound of rustling branches mixing with the sound of waves lapping against the shore. Briony looked around, enchanted in spite of herself. It was as peaceful as her grotto and just as private. She hadn't known such places existed on land. Sunlight filtered through the leaves and sparkled on the water.

She caught Harlan's gaze and swallowed when she saw the intensity in his eyes. She remembered Lyra's words from the night before. A cove sheltered by weeping willows. A place where humans go to kiss.

Briony froze and watched the changing sunlight dance across Harlan's face. Had he brought her here to kiss her? Was Lyra right in thinking that Briony had enchanted him somehow?

If she had, it was completely by accident. Perhaps the potion she had given him to make him cough up the seawater had affected him somehow.

She wanted to say something but couldn't think of a single thing. Harlan seemed content just to look at her, and Briony looked back. His eyes looked almost green now in this strange room made of leaves.

A hoarse barking sound shattered the moment. Harlan stiffened and put a protective hand on Briony's shoulder as Pup splashed out of the water and scrambled onto the rock.

"It's alright. He's a friend," Briony said. "Harlan, meet Pup."

She scratched the seal on the head as he settled by her feet. Harlan stared in surprise for a few moments, then reached out and tentatively patted Pup. The seal snuffed in pleasure and crawled over to place his head against Harlan's chest and stare into his eyes.

"He likes you," Briony said with a grin. "Sorry about your shirt."

The encounter had left Harlan's shirt damp and wrinkled. He laughed.

"It's fine. I've never been this close to a seal before. Or any sea creature, really."

Briony pressed her lips together to hide a grin. If you counted mermaids as sea creatures, that wasn't strictly true.

Pup snuggled with Harlan a moment longer, then flopped between him and Briony with a contented huff. Briony traced slow circles on his belly as

she turned back to Harlan. The human looked from her to the seal with a curious gleam in his eyes.

“What did you give to the girl we found? What was in that bottle?”

Briony froze, her hand quivering against Pup’s fur. Harlan hadn’t brought her to this private place to kiss her. He wanted to question her. She had been foolish to think there was anything more than curiosity between them.

Harlan reached over and placed his hand on top of hers. His skin was warm as sunlight.

“It was magic, wasn’t it? Some kind of potion?”

Briony nodded. There was no point lying about it when Harlan had seen everything.

“You gave me some sort of potion as well, didn’t you? The night you saved my life?”

Briony nodded again as tears welled in her eyes. Harlan knew her secret now. Knew that she made potions. He would turn his back on her just as the mermaids had. Would realize she was a monstrous witch and want nothing more to do with her.

“Can you work other kinds of magic?”

Briony blinked in surprise. Rather than pulling away, Harlan had leaned closer to her. He studied her face as if she were some rare and beautiful flower in his garden.

“Yes,” she said finally.

Harlan swallowed.

“I have no right to ask a favor of you. If anything, I owe you for saving my life. But I’m going to ask anyway.”

Briony nodded, very aware of Harlan’s hand still covering hers. The warmth of his skin had begun to spread up her arm, banishing the chill of the cold water.

“It’s the sirens,” Harlan said. “They’re growing stronger and stronger, attacking more and more ships. They used to only attack occasionally and lure a few men away. Now they take every ship that leaves the harbor. We can’t fish. We can’t trade. We’re trapped here. I’ve been looking for a solution and thought I had one with stuffing cotton in my ears, but that wasn’t enough. That experiment cost my men their lives.”

This time it was Harlan’s eyes that filled with tears. Briony took his hand in both of hers and squeezed it.

“That wasn’t your fault.”

“It was. Briony, I’m the prince of this country. I ordered that voyage to test my theory. The death of those men is on my hands.”

CHAPTER 9

Briony stared at him, eyes wide with horror. The prince? Suddenly everything made sense. Lyra wanted the prince. She wanted the kingdom.

Harlan misinterpreted her expression and pulled his hand away.

“I’m sorry. I should have told you who I was from the very beginning. But most people already know, so I thought- And when I realized you didn’t know, I couldn’t bring myself to tell you. I liked being just Harlan.”

“I understand.”

Briony leaned across Pup and took Harlan’s hand in hers once again. She stared at their intertwined fingers, unable to meet his gaze. Harlan’s secret was big, but hers was bigger.

“I-”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Harlan said. “Whatever you’re hiding, you don’t have to tell me until you’re ready. I only told you this so that you’d understand what’s at stake and how much I need your help. Could your magic fight the sirens?”

“The sirens?”

Briony stumbled a little over the word. They had always been mermaids to her, but she couldn’t call them that in front of Harlan.

“We need a way to block our ears and fight the magic,” Harlan said. “Their song lures men, convinces them to jump overboard.”

“I know.”

Briony shuddered, remembering the face of the man she had killed in her first and only feast. And the faces of all the men she had tried to save

since then. The memories of their lives before they had been cut short.

“I’ve never done magic like that before.”

“I know I’m asking a lot, but if there’s any way, we have to do it. Briony, there are so many lives at stake. I’ll pay you anything. Anything you want.”

Briony worked up the courage to look into his eyes again and was surprised by the warmth she found there. She tried to speak, but the words caught in her throat. Doubtless Harlan meant money when he said he would pay her anything she wanted. Humans seemed to like money a lot.

But caught in his warm gaze, Briony wanted something else. She leaned toward him, wondering if his soul would be as warm as his smile. As warm as his hand in hers.

Harlan leaned closer to meet her. So close that Briony could feel his breath. That was also warm. So different from the cold depths of the ocean.

Pup shifted, breaking the spell between the prince and the sea witch. Briony pulled away, her face flushed red and hot. She was as bad as Lyra, charming this human and coveting his soul. Using her magic to enchant him, even if she hadn’t meant to do it.

“Briony-”

“I’ll try,” she said, her voice little more than a whisper. “I’ll try to create a potion that can fight the siren song.”

She stood and hurried away before Harlan could ask questions. He called out her name but didn’t follow her as she pushed through the willow branches and ran along the beach.

Briony’s mind raced as she swam back to her grotto. She sorted through spell ingredients, thinking of combinations that might nullify the siren song. A potion that would let Harlan’s people sail the sea freely once more. Was it possible?

She reached the grotto and grimaced. Silver light from Lyra’s tongue spilled through the door and cast an eerie glow on the water.

The tongue!

Briony picked up the bottle and stared at it. Lyra’s magic was still in this tongue. It was in the silvery blood that had leaked out from it and filled the bottle. Briony could test her potions on that blood. Possibly even use the blood as an ingredient.

She grimaced and put the tongue back on the shelf. It was a gruesome proposition. She preferred to use plants in her potions. There were plenty of magical properties in plants.

And yet, here was a chance to end the sirens' reign of terror over the sea. To save the souls of men and make up for the one she had taken.

To save Harlan and his kingdom.

Another thought occurred to Briony, dancing around the back of her mind so lightly that she was hardly aware of it.

If she found a way to make humans immune to siren song, she could know for certain if she had accidentally enchanted Harlan. If he drank the potion and still looked at her the same way, she could follow him to the willow grove again with a clear conscious. She could know the bright light shining in his eyes was his own soul and not a side effect of her magic.

She would be free to kiss him.

Briony shook her head. It was a foolish thought. What man, especially a prince, would want to kiss her? What man would look at her as if she mattered more to him than anything else in the world?

As if he would give her anything. Even his soul.

CHAPTER 10

The next two days passed in a blur. Briony didn't sleep. She didn't eat. She barely took time to breathe as she raced through the ocean to gather the ingredients she needed.

Kelp from the shore. Algae from the shallows. Sea grass from the depths. She collected coral, sargassum, and anemones. She searched the shoreline for moonflowers and hawthorn berries. Briony mixed potions, tested them with Lyra's blood, and mixed more potions. Finally, she mixed the blood into the potion itself.

Finally, it was finished.

Harlan looked at Briony with concern when she finally handed him the bottle of glowing, silver liquid.

"I've asked too much of you," he said.

She shook her head, resisting the urge to rub her tired eyes.

"I was glad to do it."

"You're not well. Come home with me. I'll take care of you."

Briony swallowed. It was a tempting offer, but she couldn't take it. She had left her grotto a complete mess and needed to clean it.

At least, that was the excuse she gave herself. In reality, she couldn't accept any more of Harlan's kindness until he took the potion and was freed from the spell she had accidentally cast on him.

If she had cast such a spell, her heart whispered. She didn't know she had enchanted him. She only suspected.

Briony fought back a yawn and spoke quickly before Harlan could make the offer again.

“It may not seem like there’s much potion there, but it will only take one drop for each person. Let it dissolve on your tongue.”

Harlan reached for the bottle stopper, but Briony put her hand over his.

“Not here. Wait until you’re back home.”

He didn’t ask why, and she didn’t tell him. How could she explain that she couldn’t bear to watch the light fade from his eyes as he lost his love for her?

If he was enchanted, the stubborn part of her heart said. His eyes would only lose that light if he was enchanted.

“Come with me,” he said. “Anything I have is yours.”

“You don’t even know if it works yet.”

“It will. I believe in you.”

Tears filled Briony’s eyes. He believed in her because she had accidentally enchanted him.

Or perhaps his belief was genuine?

She was too tired to sort out her feelings. Too tired to trust herself not to simply believe what she wanted.

“I have to take care of some things at home,” she said. “You should go.”

“I don’t suppose you have a potion that could restore someone’s voice,” Harlan said. “That girl we found is still following me around and staring at me. She wants something, but we can’t figure out what it is.”

Lyra! Briony had completely forgotten about the mermaid in her rush to make the potion for Harlan.

“I have to go,” she said.

She rushed away, and Harlan let her go. Briony sprinted down the beach, forgetting about the prince and her exhaustion as her mind raced. Today was Lyra’s last day. She would turn to sea foam unless she won a human’s love, and that wasn’t likely.

As deadly as the little mermaid was, Briony couldn’t just sit back and let her die. She would try one last time. Offer Lyra the transformation potion and return her tongue. The humans had protection against the sirens now, so she could give Lyra back her voice without condemning men to their death.

Pup swam alongside Briony as she made her way back to her cave. He darted in front of her, blocking her path so that Briony had to dodge him to keep going.

“I don’t have time to play,” she said.

The seal ignored her and bumped her tail, sending Briony tumbling through the water.

“Not now, Pup! Go back to the surface!”

Briony pushed the seal away and darted past him. The seal sulked back to the surface. Briony felt a twinge of guilt, but she ignored it and swam into her cavern.

Three mermaids waited for her. Briony blinked in surprise. Conch, Coral, and Cuttle. Cuttle held a glowing tongue in her hand, and it cast an eerie light over her face. Briony glanced at the bottle that held Lyra’s tongue. It was still there, wrapped in the cloth she had used to cover it so she didn’t have to look at it while she worked.

So whose tongue was Cuttle holding? Had she been the victim of Lyra’s experiment?

“Briony,” Cuttle said, the sound coming from the tongue rather than her mouth. It was disorienting, but Briony pushed away her unease.

“I don’t have time to chat. I have to save Lyra.”

“Oh, yes. We know all about what you’ve done to Lyra.”

Conch and Coral circled behind Briony, blocking the exit. Briony ignored them and swam toward the shelf that held the pink-gold potion that could save Lyra. There was only one left. Briony’s frequent trips to visit Harlan on the shore had used them up more quickly than she had realized.

Cuttle darted forward and blocked Briony’s path. She held her tongue toward Briony as she spoke.

“Not so fast, witch.”

“We’re running out of time. I need that potion to save Lyra.”

Briony tried to push Cuttle aside. A sound of frustrated surprise echoed from the tongue in her hand. As if that were a signal they had been waiting for, Conch and Coral swam behind Briony and grabbed her arms. She struggled, but the mermaids held her tight.

“Lyra told us what you did to her,” Cuttle’s tongue said. *“How she came to you for help to be with the man she loved. How you betrayed her, stole her voice, and took the man for yourself.”*

“That’s not true!” Briony said. “He never loved her. I’m trying to help her!”

“More like you’re trying to poison her. What would this do? Turn her to sea foam before the sun sets?”

Cuttle picked up the bottle of pink-gold potion that Briony had been trying to reach. Briony struggled, hitting Conch and Coral with her tail, but they held tight. Cuttle studied the potion a moment, then smashed it against the wall. The glass shattered, and the potion dissolved into the ocean.

“No!” Briony said. “That was the last one!”

She struggled harder, but it was no use. The mermaids held her tight. She watched helplessly as the potion that could have saved Lyra dispersed into the water.

“You’re despicable,” Cuttle said, her eyes flashing with rage. *“Abandoning your school. Stealing our feasts. Deceiving Lyra. I should kill you now and be done with you.”*

She pulled the enchanted stone from a nearby ledge and held it to Briony’s throat. Briony found herself curious rather than afraid. What would happen if Cuttle cut her with the knife? It was enchanted to release souls, but Briony didn’t have one. Perhaps it would cause her to fade to nothing, with not even sea foam left behind to mark her existence.

“We might need her,” Coral said. “Lyra left her alive all this time for a reason. She’ll be angry if we kill her without permission.”

“She’ll probably want to do it herself,” Conch said.

Briony stiffened. Lyra had let her live? Since when did Lyra make decisions like that for the mermaids? For that matter, why was Cuttle still loyal to Lyra and obeying her orders if Lyra had cut out her tongue?

Briony should have paid more attention to what was going on, but it was far too late for that now.

“Tie her up, then,” Cuttle said, waving her tongue around to make her point. *“I’ll destroy her magic so she can’t cause trouble.”*

Briony fought, but she was no match for Conch and Coral. The mermaids wrapped Briony in seaweed and tied her to a stone column at the edge of the grotto. They braided the seaweed into her hair and wrapped that around her neck and chest. Briony couldn’t move. She could barely breathe. She watched, helpless, as Cuttle smashed her potion bottles against the rock walls. The glowing potions diffused in the ocean, casting a multicolored glow over the cave and leaving bright spots on the stone.

Cuttle picked up the cloth covering Lyra's tongue and cheered in triumph as the silver glow filled the grotto. She grabbed the bottle and handed the cloth to her sisters. They wrapped it around Briony's wrists and pulled it tight. Her fingers went numb with cold as the cloth cut off her circulation.

The floor glittered with broken glass by the time the mermaids swam away. Briony watched them go, waiting until they were out of sight before she tried to wriggle out of her bonds.

The seaweed held tight and dug into her skin. The hair around her neck choked her if she moved too much.

She gave up and stared at the wreckage around her. A lifetime of work destroyed in a matter of minutes. The potions drifted around the room in the ocean currents, colors mixing together into a strange purple hue.

Think. She needed to stay calm and think.

Briony's head drooped as a wave of exhaustion washed over her. She stared at the sparkling floor, but her eyes were drawn to a dark spot mixed in with the glass.

The enchanted stone.

The sharp edges glittered, looking even more deadly than the shards of glass that surrounded it. Briony resumed her struggles. If only she could reach it, she could cut herself free!

The seaweed held tight, and Briony slumped in defeat. She really was trapped.

Her thoughts turned from her predicament to Harlan. She had thought him safe from Lyra, but what would happen if the little mermaid had her tongue again? What if she sang to the prince before he took the potion?

He would be at Lyra's mercy, and the little mermaid had none.

Briony swallowed. Her potions were gone, but she still had magic left. A magic she had promised herself she would never use again, but it seemed the only option now.

Briony began to sing.

CHAPTER 11

Briony's voice filled the water and cast a shimmering spell of sound. She poured herself into the song as she never had before. Not in training. Not at that ill-fated feast.

She watched the opening to the cave, but nothing happened. No one came. She hung her head. What had she expected? That she could somehow magically enchant a hero to come to her rescue?

She closed her eyes. If she couldn't escape, perhaps it was better to give up and sleep. That was the only way to stop worrying about Harlan. To stop imagining what Lyra might do to him.

A whiskery kiss pressed against her forehead. Briony opened her eyes and found glittering black eyes staring back at her.

"Pup!"

The seal kissed her again, then backed up and turned a flip, asking her to play.

"Fetch, boy!"

Briony tossed her head toward the enchanted stone, choking as she pushed against the hair twisted around her neck. Pup followed the motion and darted toward the knife. He picked it up in his mouth and spun around the room, the dark stone glittering in the water.

"Bring it back," Briony coaxed. "Put it in my hand."

She repeated the command again, singing it this time just in case that magic could help her make her point.

Pup spun through the water, around the column, and dropped the knife into Briony's outstretched hand.

“Good boy.”

Briony twisted to cut her bonds. It took some straining to reach the cloth around her wrists, but once she did the knife sliced through them easily. She twisted again and kept cutting. Strands of seaweed and hair floated through the water. Briony freed one arm and turned her attention to cutting her torso loose. Then she cut the hair around her neck and took a deep breath, grateful to be free.

Pup clapped his flippers when Briony finally pushed free. He nudged her arm, asking her to throw the stone again. She picked up a nearby rock instead and threw it out of the cave. Pup darted off, delighted with the game.

Briony ran her hands through her hair. Well, what was left of her hair. It floated in uneven clumps around her head, every strand a different length.

She grabbed her hair, twisted it around her hand, and ran the knife through it again, cutting the uneven strands to roughly the same length. It reached just past her chin now. Not long enough for it to be used to trap her again.

Briony looked around the ruins of her grotto, hoping against hope that she might find a helpful potion hidden somewhere in the wreckage.

Unfortunately, the three sisters had been thorough in their destruction. Briony swallowed. She would have to reveal herself to Harlan as a mermaid if she wanted to warn him. She would have to tell him the truth.

There was no time to dwell on that. Briony flicked her tail and darted out of the cave. Pup followed her, and Briony shook her head.

“Stay. This might get dangerous.”

She sang the words, turning them into a command. The seal ignored her and followed, spinning around her as she swam, nudging at the hand that held the enchanted stone, asking her to throw it again.

Normally Briony wouldn’t hesitate to throw the stone, but it was the only magic she had left. With a sigh, Briony swam down to the ocean floor and found a rock. She threw it for the seal. He darted away to fetch it, and Briony swam away as fast as she could.

She didn’t look back. She could only hope this worked and Pup stayed out of trouble.

Briony swam to the hidden cove where she kept her clothes and potions, then scolded herself for wasting time. She didn’t have a potion to turn

herself human, so the clothes stashed there would do her no good.

Hopefully Harlan would be somewhere near the sea.

She swam to the willow tree next, hoping desperately that he would be there so she could speak to him in private.

The space under the willow branches was empty. The leaves swayed in the breeze, matching the motion of Briony's short hair. She leaned against the rock to rest a moment and remembered the feeling of Harlan's hand against hers. His warm breath on her face as he leaned close to her, watching her with those enchanting, ever-changing eyes.

He had probably taken the potion by now. If she had accidentally enchanted him, the spell should be broken.

Briony pushed away from the rock and sank into the water. Would Harlan even believe her when she warned him of danger? What if everything changed when he discovered that she was a mermaid?

Out of ideas, Briony swam to the harbor. She ducked under docks and ships, staying hidden in shadows as she searched for Harlan.

One ship had a crowd gathered around it, so Briony made her way to that dock. She swam under the gangplank, watching the motion between gaps in the boards and trying to make sense of the shadows. Men moved at a quick pace, loading things onto the ship.

Men and one woman. Briony couldn't see her face, but she guessed that the larger shadow must be cast by someone wearing a skirt.

"Don't you find it odd that she follows you everywhere?" a gruff male voice said.

"Don't be rude, Captain. She's mute, not deaf."

Harlan! Briony pressed her hands over her mouth to stifle her gasp. She had found him! And the woman following him could only be Lyra. Had the little mermaid made her move yet? If she was still mute, it seemed that Conch, Coral, and Cuttle hadn't yet returned her tongue.

Briony watched with annoyance as the shadow of the skirt moved closer to the shoes that must be Harlan's. The shoes stepped away. The skirt moved closer. The shoes stepped away again.

"We can't take her with us on the voyage," the captain's gruff voice said. "It's too dangerous."

"I agree," Harlan said.

His shoes turned as he faced Lyra.

“I have to leave now. The ladies at the castle will take care of you.”

Lyra let out an anguished wail and lunged toward Harlan, wrapping her arms around him and merging their two shadows into one. Briony glared up at them. The sun was low in the sky, which meant Lyra was almost out of time. It was no wonder she was feeling desperate.

But she had also refused all Briony’s offers of help. The little mermaid was caught in a disaster of her own making.

Harlan tried to step away, but Lyra clung tightly to him, allowing herself to be dragged as he moved and continuing the awful wailing sound.

“She’ll hurt herself at this rate,” the captain muttered. “Maybe it’s better to bring her along after all.”

Harlan stopped trying to pull away, and Lyra stopped wailing.

“It’s dangerous,” Harlan said. “Do you understand that? There is a chance we all could die.”

Briony saw a shadow move. Lyra nodding.

Harlan sighed.

“Very well. Captain, have your men prepare a safe place for her to sit. We’ve delayed too long already. Prepare to set sail!”

CHAPTER 12

The ship floated from the harbor. Briony swam underneath it, following it to the open ocean. She searched the dark water beneath her but saw no sign of mermaids.

Maybe the others weren't coming after all.

Or maybe they were just biding their time and waiting until the ship reached deeper water.

Briony swam around the ship and peeked above the surface. The sun hovered just above the horizon. If the mermaids planned to save Lyra, they could not wait much longer.

She swam around the ship, staying close to it so she was out of sight unless someone looked straight down. Finally she found Harlan leaning against the railing.

Briony pushed away from the ship and watched him for a few minutes. He stared out at the horizon as if looking for something. His face was tense, and he held the glowing potion bottle in both hands. It was less full than it had been. It looked like he and his entire crew had swallowed a drop as instructed.

She could only hope it worked.

"Harlan."

Briony whispered his name, but her voice was swallowed by the rushing wind and the cries of seagulls.

"Harlan!"

She tried again, half-singing the word to help it carry.

He looked up, squinting at the horizon as he searched. But he was looking into the setting sun. He still couldn’t see her.

“Harlan, look down!”

She sang the words this time, giving him a command.

A command he completely ignored.

Briony grinned, feeling both triumphant and somewhat defeated. Her potion had worked. He hadn’t listened to her even when she sang a command.

And yet, that meant she had no way to get his attention without drawing attention from others.

A frantic wail filled the air. Harlan jumped as Lyra grabbed his arm and pointed toward the sea. She kept screaming, and more sailors rushed to the deck.

“Siren!” one of them screamed.

He hoisted a harpoon gun onto his shoulder.

“Don’t shoot!” Briony sang.

The sailor paused for a moment, and her heart sank. The potion hadn’t worked after all.

Then he blinked his eyes and pulled the trigger.

Briony dove beneath the surface. The harpoon flew through the water, just missing her tail. Her heart hammered in her chest as she kept swimming down.

It worked. Her potion worked! The sailor and Harlan hadn’t listened to her song. They were safe.

Excitement gave way to melancholy, and Briony swam under the ship, following it. The sun tinted the water red as it sank ever closer to the horizon, but Briony hardly noticed as she stayed in the ship’s shadow.

They had shot at her. They saw her as a monster. Even knowing her voice did not affect them, they had still tried to kill her.

What would Harlan do if she told him the truth? Would he turn his back on her? Lock her up in a dungeon beneath his castle? Order her execution?

She wasn’t sure which would be more painful.

Motion beneath her caught Briony’s attention. She looked down and gasped in alarm. A silver glow grew brighter and brighter, like an enormous jellyfish swimming toward her.

But it wasn’t a jellyfish. It was mermaids. Hundreds of mermaids.

Briony stared. They were coming for her.

No, that wasn't right. They were coming for the ship.

They were coming for Lyra.

Briony pressed against the bottom of the ship, watching as the mermaids formed a circle around it. She searched the crowd for familiar faces almost without meaning to. She saw a few former schoolmates. No sign of the sages or the younger mermaids who hadn't feasted yet.

Then Conch, Coral, and Cuttle broke away from the crowd. Cuttle held Lyra's bottled tongue in one hand and her own in another. She waved both as some sort of signal, and the mermaids began to sing.

Briony realized with surprise that it wasn't the song of the feast or any of the others she had learned. This new song was gentler than those, but still insistent and vibrating with power.

Magic filled the water as the mermaids sang of love.

"Kiss her," they sang together. "Kiss the girl you love."

Their hair glowed silver as they sang. Their eyes flashed with the magic of stolen souls.

Would Briony's potion keep Harlan safe from such an attack? He had ignored her song, but she was only one mermaid. And her voice had not been strengthened by eating the souls of men.

"Kiss her."

Briony waited for the sailors to attack. To shoot harpoons to scatter the mermaids and disrupt their song.

Nothing happened. The ship kept drifting. The mermaids kept singing.

What was happening on the deck of the ship? Was Harlan kissing Lyra even now? Had the song convinced him to share his soul with her?

Briony gritted her teeth and pushed away from the ship, giving her tail a flick as she swam toward the surface. She was little more than a shadow as she darted through the silvery crowd. Those that noticed her at all shrugged and kept singing.

"Kiss the girl you love."

Briony reached the surface and smiled in relief. Harlan was not kissing Lyra. The little mermaid leaned close to him, looking up and fluttering her eyelashes. But when she reached for his hand, he pulled it away.

"What do they mean, 'kiss the girl you love?'" the captain asked. "Have the sirens gone mad?"

The sailors around him looked equally confused. They whispered to each other, sharing theories.

Harlan said nothing. He turned from Lyra and stared at the water.

At Briony.

He took a step toward the ship's railing and smiled.

"Kiss the girl I love?" he said. "It doesn't seem like such a bad idea to me."

The mermaids looked from him to Briony and changed their song.

"Kiss Lyra. Kiss the girl beside you."

Briony's heart skipped a beat as Harlan ignored the command and took another step toward her. She swam toward the ship, trying to understand what was happening. Hardly daring to believe it was real.

Harlan wasn't under a spell. Her potion had worked, and he was completely ignoring the mermaid's song.

And he was still walking toward her.

Harlan bumped against the ship's railing and blinked in surprise. As if he had forgotten where he was. As if he had been so caught up in the moment that he hadn't realized Briony was floating in the ocean below him rather than standing on the ship.

"I'm sorry," Briony said. "I should have told you sooner."

Harlan leaned toward her, his torso hovering over the ship's railing.

"I had a few suspicions about why you were always wet when we met, so this isn't a complete surprise. I understand why you didn't want to tell me."

"Understand? How can you understand? I'm a monster."

"You're a hero. Thanks to your magic, we'll never have to worry about siren song again."

He held up the glowing potion bottle, and the crew looked from it to Briony as understanding dawned. They began to clap and cheer. Briony stared with wide eyes. The mermaid song continued, joining with the applause to create a strange, discordant song.

"Kiss Lyra! Kiss Lyra!"

But Harlan had eyes only for Briony.

"Will you join me for dinner tonight?" he said. "We still need to discuss your payment for the potion. I promised to give you whatever you want, but you haven't told me what that is yet."

Briony tried to speak, but her voice froze in her throat. What she wanted. Did she dare to say what she wanted out loud?

A scream filled the air, and Lyra attacked Harlan. She clawed at his arm, trying to grab the potion from him. The mermaids took their cue from her and gave up on singing. They surged forward and crashed against the ship, rocking it dangerously from side to side.

Harlan stumbled as the ship lurched beneath him. The bottle slipped in his hands, but he kept his grip and pulled it close to his chest.

Briony tried to swim toward him, but the swarm of mermaids blocked her way.

The sailors recovered from their surprise and shot harpoons into the water. The mermaids ignored them. Whenever one was hit and sank beneath the surface, another took her place. Silvery blood filled the water, and the mermaids' beautiful song gave way to a deadly screech as they battered the ship.

Behind Briony, the sun touched the horizon and began to slip beneath it. Lyra screamed with rage and lunged at Harlan. He pulled the potion bottle out of her reach, but she wasn't aiming for that. She tackled the prince and wrapped her arms around him as they both toppled over the railing and fell into the sea.

CHAPTER 13

The crowd of mermaids separated, creating an open space of water for Lyra and Harlan to land in. Harlan struggled, clinging to the bottle with one hand and pushing Lyra away with the other.

But they were in her territory now, and he couldn't break free. Coral swam out of the crowd and handed Lyra a pink-gold potion. Where had that come from? The little mermaid drank it and screamed as her body twisted, transforming back into a mermaid.

Both Harlan and Briony stared, frozen in their surprise. Conch joined Coral, and the two mermaids grabbed Harlan's legs and pulled him under the water.

Lyra went with him, her arms still wrapped around his waist. Harlan struggled, but he was no match for the mermaids. He closed his eyes and pulled the potion bottle to his chest, protecting it even as he was attacked. Briony tried to swim toward him, but Cuttle blocked her way and pushed her back.

Briony screamed in anguish as Lyra kissed Harlan. The prince's eyes opened in shock as the mermaid's lips met his. He pulled his head back and tried to push Lyra away.

The little mermaid twisted her fingers in his hair and pulled his head toward her. Bubbles streamed from Harlan's mouth as Lyra kissed him. Precious air he couldn't afford to lose.

The prince began to glow silver. Lyra may not have been able to convince him to share his soul, but she could still steal it.

Briony couldn’t take it any longer. She pulled out her enchanted stone and slashed at Cuttle.

The mermaid’s tongue gave an otherworldly scream as silver blood oozed from the cut. Part of it swirled in the water, and part of it streamed up toward the surface and the sky.

A soul set free to float to heaven.

Briony slashed again. More blood. More souls. She hardly noticed. She only cared about reaching Harlan in time. Lyra’s hair glowed as Harlan’s soul drifted from his body to hers.

Briony lunged forward and slashed with the stone, not noticing or caring what she cut as long as it got her closer to the prince. The ocean filled with silver blood and wispy souls floating toward the stars. The mermaids retreated, not willing to lose their life or magic for Lyra’s sake.

Conch and Coral let go of Harlan and swam toward Briony. She held up the knife, and their eyes widened as they looked behind Briony and saw the chaos she had caused.

They looked at each other, nodded in silent agreement, then turned and fled.

That left a clear path to Lyra. Briony kicked her tail and lunged toward the little mermaid. She held the enchanted stone in front of her like a spear. Lyra was focused on the kiss, on stealing Harlan’s soul, and didn’t see her coming.

The enchanted stone plunged into Lyra’s back. The little mermaid pulled away from Harlan and opened her mouth in a silent scream. The skin around the knife dissolved into bubbles. Briony pulled it out, staring in surprise. Lyra whirled around to face Briony with hate filled eyes that glowed silver with the light of Harlan’s soul.

No. Lyra couldn’t have him. Not Harlan. Not any man ever again. Briony lifted the stone and plunged it into Lyra’s chest. If she couldn’t save Harlan’s life, perhaps she could still free his soul.

The ocean darkened as the sun finally sank beneath the horizon. The silver blood in the water and silver souls in the air glowed all the brighter. Lyra glowed brightest of all as the souls she had stolen escaped her body.

She lifted her hand to strike Briony, defiant even with a knife in her chest. But the hand was gone. It had dissolved into sea foam, and the little

mermaid’s arm followed. Souls soared upwards from the silver bubbles, finally finding their way to heaven.

Lyra glared at Briony one last time. Then her face dissolved, and the mermaid was gone. The stone knife fell through the empty water, and Briony reached out her hand and caught it. Silver sea foam drifted past her skin and floated toward the surface, following the souls on their journey.

“What did you do?”

Briony looked up in surprise and saw Cuttle staring at her with angry silver eyes. The mermaid held Harlan’s limp body wrapped in her tail. She clutched her tongue with one hand and the silver potion bottle in the other.

“Lyra had finally won a human man’s love! She planned to share his soul and give us all the magic we wanted, and you ruined it!”

“He never loved her,” Briony said.

She swam slowly toward Cuttle, but her eyes kept drifting to Harlan. Was he still alive? He had been underwater a long time and suffered a siren’s kiss. Could any man survive that?

Cuttle noticed her looking and tightened her tail around the prince. She waved the potion at Briony.

“Is this how you made him not love her anymore? You used your magic to kill his love?”

“He never loved her,” Briony repeated. “The potion simply makes humans immune to siren song.”

“Immune to our song? Well, we can’t have that,” Cuttle said.

She pulled the cork from the bottle before Briony could stop her. The silver liquid floated into the ocean, joining the swirls of blood and the few lingering souls.

Cuttle’s triumphant expression turned to horror as her tongue began to dissolve in her hand.

“My voice,” she said, her words raspy and fading. *“It’s doing something to my voice!”*

Cuttle’s skin flashed silver. Her hair became as dark as Briony’s as a flood of souls surged out of her body.

The mermaid dropped Harlan and swam away, trying to escape the potion in the water. The other mermaids watched her in confusion, then began to cough as the potion reached them. They clutched their throats as

souls drifted from their bodies and traveled toward the sky. The ocean fell silent and dark as the potion stole their voices and their magic.

Briony didn't stay to watch how it ended. She darted forward and grabbed Harlan, pulling him toward the surface as fast as she could swim. His skin was cold, and his body was limp. Was he dead?

She wouldn't stop to think about that now. She just needed to get him somewhere safe.

She broke through the surface and looked for the ship. It had sailed away from the mermaids and was now far away on the horizon.

Land was closer than the ship. Briony swam toward it, dragging Harlan toward a familiar willow tree.

Pup surfaced and tucked his head under Harlan's shoulder, helping Briony to drag him through the water. Briony offered the seal a small smile and kept swimming.

The moon shone in the sky, bathing the willow tree in silvery light by the time they reached the shore. Briony looked back at the ocean before slipping under the tree. A silver patch glowed on the water where Cuttle had spilled the potion. Even from this distance, Briony could see the freed souls making their way to heaven in a silver wisp of ribbon dancing through the sky.

She hoped Harlan's soul wasn't among them.

Briony pulled the prince to the rock under the willow. She hoisted him onto it, glad for Pup's help, then pulled herself up alongside him. It was awkward sitting on the rock with a tail instead of legs, but she was out of potions. She had no choice.

She leaned close to Harlan's chest, pressing her hand against the prince's soaked shirt to feel for a heartbeat.

It fluttered there, faint against her skin. Hope.

Briony pulled herself further up the rock. In the memories, she had seen sailors breathing for their fallen friends, trying to save them by pressing air into their mouths.

Perhaps she could do the same.

She copied what she had seen them do. Pressing on Harlan's chest and breathing into his mouth. It was a siren's kiss in reverse. She was sharing life with him instead of taking it.

When she had nothing more to give, Briony pulled back to gasp for air. The night was still for a moment, silence interrupted only by the sound of waves and rustling branches.

Then Harlan coughed up sea water mixed with silver magic and opened his eyes.

CHAPTER 14

Pup barked and planted a wet kiss on Harlan’s lips. The prince sputtered a protest, laughing and coughing as Briony tried to push the seal away. It was difficult, as she couldn’t balance on land with her tail.

She held up her enchanted stone.

“Fetch, Pup.”

The seal barked with glee and dove into the sea to chase the rock. Throwing it threw Briony further off balance, and Harlan wrapped an arm around her to keep her from falling. He looked from her short hair to her shimmering tail but didn’t say a word. Briony opened her mouth a few times, trying to explain, feeling like a fish floundering when it was suddenly scooped out of the water.

Finally she gave up and closed her mouth in a grim line. Harlan studied her with those enchanting eyes, and he kept his arm around her waist. His grip was loose. She could shake free at any moment and escape into the sea. She probably should. That would be the smart thing to do.

And yet, Briony didn’t move.

“Something is different about you,” Harlan said finally. “You cut your hair.”

Briony laughed in spite of everything.

“Yes, my hair is the thing that’s changed the most since you saw me last.”

Harlan met her gaze and looked down the length of her body again. His eyes widened, and his face flushed.

“Oh, you’re- Um. Here. Take this.”

He peeled his wet shirt off with some difficulty and turned away from Briony as he held it toward her. Briony looked from Harlan's bare torso to the crumpled fabric in his hands. She still didn't understand human's obsession with clothing, but it was sweet that Harlan would rather go unclothed himself than leave her exposed.

She pulled the shirt on, and the wet fabric clung to her skin and scales. Harlan glanced back to confirm that she was dressed, then pulled her close to him again.

"What happened?" he asked.

Briony stayed silent for a moment. Then the words burst from her like the tide surging up the shore. She told Harlan about the feast and the man she had killed. The potions. Lyra's endless thirst for souls and her quest for Harlan's. The little mermaid dissolving into sea foam when Briony stabbed her.

Harlan simply sat and listened while he moved his hand in a small circle on her back. It was a comforting gesture. Briony finished her story with the potion spilling into the water and freeing the souls. Harlan's hand stilled then, and his eyes grew wide.

"It took the siren's voices and freed the souls? Did you know it could do that?"

Briony shook her head.

"I didn't know such a thing was possible, and I don't know if it will last. But the souls that were taken are free now."

She pointed through the willow branches to the sea, where the silver ribbon of souls still danced through the evening sky. Harlan stared at it for a long moment, the silver light reflecting in his eyes, then turned back to Briony. She swallowed and looked down, unwilling to meet his gaze.

"I'm one of them. You must hate me."

"You're nothing like them, and I don't hate you."

He pulled Briony a little closer. Reached a hand over to lift her chin gently and raise her face to his. She met his gaze this time, smiling back when she saw the warmth in his expression.

"I still don't quite understand the part about Lyra," he said. "Why did she turn into a human and want me to kiss her? I'm almost relieved to learn she was a mermaid. I didn't want to be inconsiderate to a stranded,

shipwrecked girl, but it was unnerving to have her following me through the castle and staring at me like I was the answer to all her hopes and dreams."

He mimicked Lyra's wide-eyed stare, and Briony laughed. Then she grew serious.

"Mermaids steal the souls of men, but those souls are never truly theirs. For a mermaid to truly possess an immortal soul, a man must share his with her. He must love her so much that she is worth more to him than his father and mother. If he loves her that much, and he kisses her as a sign of his love, half of his soul will pass into her body. Her tail will turn to legs, and she can live with him on land and go to heaven with him when she dies."

Harlan's eyes widened even further, until he almost looked like his impression of Lyra.

"That's possible? For a mermaid to become human permanently?"

Briony nodded. Harlan looked thoughtful as he turned back to the ocean.

"What will they do to you if you return?"

He gestured to the glowing, silver sea, and Briony shuddered.

"I can't return without magic to defend myself. Not after stabbing Lyra and robbing them of their voices and magic. I'll have to swim to a new sea. Find a corner of the ocean with no mermaids or men and live there."

"That sounds lonely."

"I can bring Pup."

She nodded toward the water, where the seal splashed happily in the waves and played with the enchanted stone.

"It sounds lonely for me as well. Who will I talk to if you swim away and never return?"

Briony stared at him, and Harlan's face flushed red.

"Briony, you're in this trouble because of me. I didn't know what I was asking when I asked you to make me that potion, but I'm afraid I still would have asked even if I had known. You saved an entire kingdom. My kingdom. You freed thousands of souls as well. You're a hero."

Briony shrugged.

"I'm a monster. It was the least I could do."

"No, don't say that about yourself. You're not a monster, and you're nothing like them."

The conviction in his voice caught Briony off guard. She stared into Harlan's eyes. He leaned closer, whispering in her ear as he wrapped his arm further around her waist.

"I promised you anything you wanted in exchange for that potion, and I meant it. If you really want to swim away where no one can find you, I'll give you supplies for the journey and keep you a secret from the world. I'll never tell another living soul about you."

For some reason, Briony's eyes filled with tears. That was the plan she herself had proposed, so why did his offer make her so sad?

"Or-" Harlan began.

"Or?"

"Or you could stay. Let me share my kingdom and my life and my soul with you."

Briony's breath caught in her throat. Could Harlan really mean that? Could he really love her like that?

The light in his eyes said that he did.

"I have nothing more to offer," Briony said. "The ingredients to my potions are all deep in the sea. I won't be able to work that magic again."

"I don't want your magic, Briony. I want you by my side in this life and the next. A kiss is a poor reward for saving a kingdom, but it's the best I can offer. Will you accept it?"

In that moment, Briony saw two futures flash before her. In one, she lived in a new grotto, surrounded by glowing potions. At home in the sea. Independent but completely alone.

In the other, she walked hand in hand with Harlan. It wouldn't be easy. She would have to learn how to be human. Learn how to rule a kingdom. Her life would be shortened by hundreds of years. She would watch Harlan grow old in the blink of an eye. Watch their children grow to take their place.

And then, in a few short decades, she and Harlan would rise together to heaven, to that unknown place that souls went when they flew to the sky.

"A kiss is not a poor reward," she whispered. "Not when it includes your soul. What you offer is far too valuable a payment for the service I gave you."

"In that case, will you accept it as a gift?"

Harlan leaned forward until their foreheads touched. His skin was warm against Briony's, and she could feel his breath.

"Yes," she whispered softly. "I will accept your love if you will take mine in return."

Harlan leaned closer still, wrapping his other arm around Briony as he kissed her.

Gentle warmth flowed into Briony's chest. The ocean's chill ebbed out of her as a glow filled her, feeling both unfamiliar and as if it had been there her entire life.

The warmth settled in her tail, seeping into it like the sun on a summer afternoon. Briony had expected it to hurt, but it didn't. The warmth faded, and she pulled away from Harlan to look down at her toes. She wiggled them, laughing as she turned back to Harlan.

"It worked!"

He smiled back.

"It seems like it did, but maybe we should kiss again just to make sure. I want to make sure I share my soul with you properly."

"That seems wise."

Briony pushed her legs against the rocks, moving closer to Harlan and kissing him. The warm feeling in her chest grew, thawing corners of her heart that she hadn't known were frozen. Behind them, a silver stream of souls continued to dance in the sky as they flew toward the stars.

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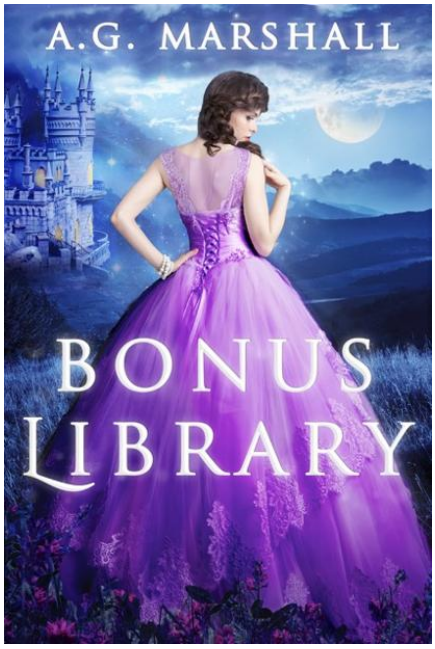

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A.G. Marshall loves fairy tales and has been writing stories since she could hold a pencil. She is a professional pianist and perfected her storytelling by writing college papers about music (which is more similar to magic than you might think).

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